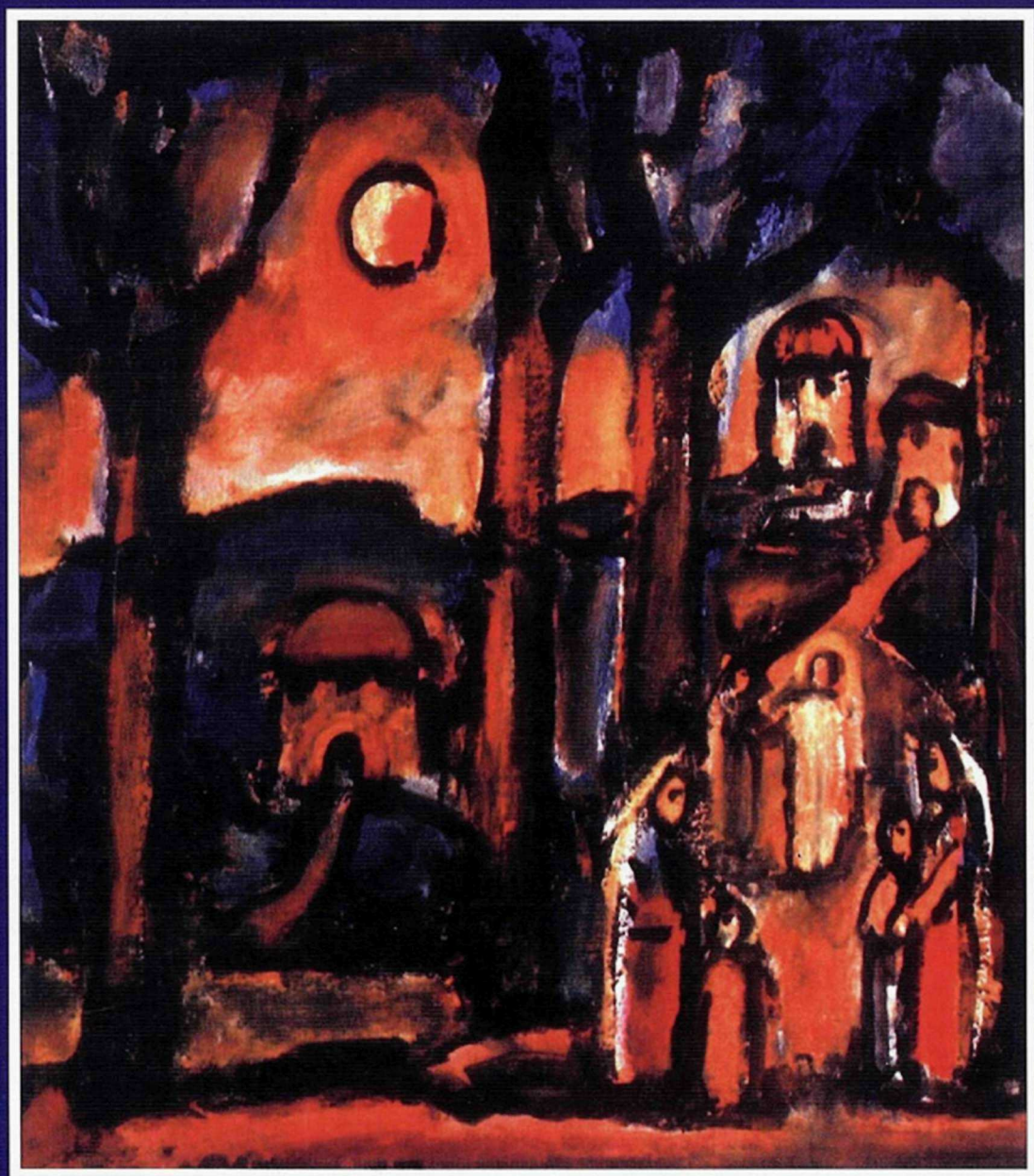


# THE VALUE *OF YOUR LIFE*



Juan Manuel García de Alba S.J.

Translated from the Spanish by William Quinn

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**Guadalajara, Jal., June 2007**

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*To those whom I can reach,  
through this book,  
at important moments in their lives,  
and to those who have been close to me.*

## Table of contents

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<b>1. Human Existence</b> . . . . .	13
Introduction . . . . .	14
Humanity Today, Seen in the Light of Its Origin . . . . .	15
Vocation and Destiny . . . . .	18
Human Activity and Earthly Work . . . . .	21
Constitution of the Human Person . . . . .	26
Meaning of Human Sexuality . . . . .	37
 <b>2. Meaningful Moments of Human Life</b> . . . . .	 46
Fertilization . . . . .	47
Gestation . . . . .	51
Birth . . . . .	55
Human Development . . . . .	59
Infancy . . . . .	62
Education and Risk . . . . .	69
Adolescence . . . . .	77
Youth . . . . .	85
Human Maturity . . . . .	92
Complementarity . . . . .	102
Parenthood . . . . .	109
Human Suffering . . . . .	115
People Grow Old . . . . .	122
Death, Fullness of Life . . . . .	127
Human Transcendence . . . . .	133
Resurrection . . . . .	137
 <b>3. Humanity in the World</b> . . . . .	 144
Humanity as Lord and Master . . . . .	145
The Things of Nature . . . . .	148

The World as an Object of Knowledge, Exploration, Experimentation, Exploitation and Consumption . . . . .	151
Humanity of the World . . . . .	153
<b>4. The Human Person as Project . . . . .</b>	<b>158</b>
The Human Person as Project . . . . .	159
The Human Person Pre-seen (Pre-vision) . . . . .	161
The Human Person Pre-loved (Pre-dilection) . . . . .	163
The Human Person Pre-chosen (Pre-election) . . . . .	164
God's Care for the Human Person (Pro-vidence) <sup>1</sup> . . . . .	166
<b>5. The Human Person Divided . . . . .</b>	<b>170</b>
The Human Person against Himself . . . . .	171
Sin against the Human Person . . . . .	175
The Thoughts of the Heart . . . . .	178
The Human Person as Sin . . . . .	182
The Human Person against Others . . . . .	186
Conversion, Reconciliation, Regeneration . . . . .	190
Eternal Frustration . . . . .	199
Eternal Fulfillment . . . . .	203
<b>6. The Integrated Person . . . . .</b>	<b>208</b>
The Unique and Irreplaceable Human Person . . . . .	209
What is Human about the Human Person . . . . .	214
People and the Life of Christ in Them: Grace . . . . .	219
<b>7. People for Others . . . . .</b>	<b>224</b>
People and the Encounter with God . . . . .	225



Service and the Encounter	
with Jesus in people . . . . .	.230
Christ's Demands on Others . . . . .	.237
Some Bibliography . . . . .	.248

# 1 Human Existence

## Introduction

Many years ago Harnack said that Jesus had been a genius because of his penetrating ideas about the human person. I believe that was not the only reason he was a genius. You might ask: What are your ideas about the human person? About yourself? About others?

The importance and meaning of others has a direct and profound connection with people's attitude toward the world, life, their possessions and mainly, the idea they have of themselves.

This book attempts to reflect anthropologically using the Bible as a basis. My intention is to offer a descriptive anthropology of values and meanings that is concrete, dynamic, historical, personal, and practical; an anthropology that helps present-day people to value their life and that of others. For this reason, the book avoids abstract, timeless, generic reflections on the presence of human beings in the past.

The idea is to increase our store not just of knowledge, but also of values and meaning. We are interested not only in our way of thinking, but also, mainly, our way of feeling, of loving, of being, of believing and of hoping.

We will try to share values by reflecting on the Bible, in a dialogue with God through personal reflection and assimilation. We will describe life as it has been lived throughout the different ages of history and in the world around us. The Word of God is a starting point for formulating our own word, the word that expresses our life.

Hopefully, this book will spark reflection, so that we come to value and love the life of each one of us.

I would like to help you, in all humility, to value your own life more, as well as the lives of others, especially people going through existential crises brought about by sorrow, poverty, anxiety or sin. I would like to share with you a specific way of looking at your life and valuing it. My hope is to articulate a response to the mystery of life in its reference to Jesus Christ.

## **Humanity Today, Seen in the Light of its Origin**

The Bible's message is a message for today, not for yesterday or tomorrow. If it makes reference to the past or the future, it is only to highlight the value of the human person today.

What we find in the Bible is not so much different people's reflections about God, but rather God's reflection about people, communicated to the authors of the sacred books.



In people's relationship with God, -or in their solitude-, *man's problem is not God; on the contrary, God's problem is man.*

J. A. Heschel

The question we ask ourselves is not so much What is the human person? And the answer we are looking for is not an impersonal answer. The question about the human person is really a question about ourselves. And the answer we give in anthropology is the answer we will give in our life. Our way of understanding the human person will be our way of understanding ourselves. Our reflection is about life as it is lived, in order to live it. The question about the human person is a question about the present, not the past. When we are asked, "Who are you?" we answer by giving our name, or sometimes our profession. The Bible also answers the question in a different way, by looking back at humanity's origin. What constitutes humanity is its past, made present in individuals.

In the Book of Genesis, people are presented as a work of God. They belong to God just as any work of art belongs to its maker. What is most inherent to people is that they do not belong to themselves. They are God's. And inasmuch as they are God's, they belong to themselves; and even though they are infused with a sense of otherness, they bear it as a gift. Belonging to God does not alienate people, it affirms them. In the Bible, the human person is not anonymous.

Gn. 1: 26ff;  
2:7ff  
Rm 14:8-9

Humans are worth more than all the other creatures, because God made them better, and because he has set his eyes on them. A human being's worth is what she is worth to God; the measure of a person's

value is in the heart and the eyes of God. He is humanity's author and teacher. God is the one who shows the human person how to be human.

Biblical anthropology asks questions about the human person, but the main question is not so much "What is he?" as "Who is he?" It is not an anthropology that focuses on wealth or misery, but on people's situations, their crises, whatever they may be. And the one who asks about people in the Bible, is God. God wonders, and asks the universe, and above all the man himself: "*Adam, where are you?*" He asks Adam to locate himself, to situate himself. And Adam's response is to hide, and eventually to lose his place. God's greatest and most passionate work is not creation; it is setting out to look for Adam, who is lost. God is still searching.

Gn. 3:19  
1 Co. 15:45-49

*I called and no one would answer,  
I spoke and they would not listen.* (Is. 66:4)

*Why did I find no one when I came?  
Why did no one answer when I called?* (Is. 50:2)

*I was ready to be approached by those who did not  
consult me,  
ready to be found by those who did not seek me.  
I said, "I am here, I am here," to a nation that did not  
invoke my name.* (Is. 65:1)

Gn. 22:1; 46:2  
Ex. 3:5; 1 S. 3:4  
Cf. Lk 1:38;  
Heb 10:7-9

"*I am here*" is an expression that means willingness, consent, acceptance. That is the sense in which Abraham, Jacob, Moses and Samuel use it.

In the context of the New Testament, we ask where people are in their relationship with Jesus Christ:

*Who do people say the Son of Man is?*

Jesus asked. What do I mean to people?

*And you, who do you say I am?*

What do I mean to you at this stage of your life?

Mt 16:15

## Vocation and Destiny

What we mean here by vocation is God's ongoing call to people to fulfill their potential. It is a dynamic project of fulfillment that people achieve gradually over the stages of their life; it is the inner freeing of people that makes them more and more their own master, capable of giving of themselves freely; it is a gradual and progressive liberation that takes place in the here and now and that leads to people's overall fulfillment. It would be correct to say that a person's vocation and destiny is to fulfill that dream that God has had for her since before the creation of the world. There is also a vocation to Christian life, and to specific functions within the Christian community, such as being an apostle.

We are not yet referring to the particular and personal vocation, that task that each person is called to carry out in life; we are referring to God's plan, which for us is a vocation and a destiny that should be fulfilled freely.

Ep. 1:3ff;  
1 Co. 2:26

The nation of Israel comes to know its salvation through its liberation, and its liberation through the

covenant. The nation's vocation and destiny consists of the covenant with God so that, with him, it can achieve liberation and conquer the promised land. An individual's vocation and destiny also starts with the liberation from oppressive structures, so that he can conquer himself and the situation he lives in, and thus accede to the fullness of salvation, which is at the same time the fullness of the covenant. Like the nation of Israel, people are called to be God's ally.

A person's vocation is an ongoing call that God makes to her to be internally and externally free; it is a call to the covenant, and therefore, to faithfulness. We could also say that it is a call to be true to oneself and consistent with history.

The fact that people are made in God's image and likeness is not just a detail of their origin that highlights their dignity; it is really their vocation. It is a commitment and a task; it tells us what people are supposed to become through their actions.

From the beginning the human person, the first Adam, was created in the image and likeness of Jesus Christ, the second Adam. He is the authentic image of the invisible God, and other individuals are as well, inasmuch as they are essentially and existentially related to Jesus Christ. People have been made in God's image and likeness even in the flesh, i.e., in their condition of weakness. Individual human beings are not the ones who show us what humanity is; in Jesus Christ, God himself is the model of humanity. We humans must strive to be like Jesus, not the other way around.

Col. 1:15;  
1 Co. 15:49



Being a Christian implies a very specific way of seeing, considering and valuing the human person; and an even more specific way of living and believing in Jesus Christ.

A person's vocation consists of the ongoing, constantly renewed call to follow Jesus Christ. It is a call to liberation and covenant with him, and through him with all people, especially the neediest. It is a way of following Jesus Christ in the aspect of his personality that shows the greatest freedom and makes the biggest impact: his way of being for others. By following Jesus day after day, we reproduce his image in our here and now.

The ultimate reason for people's (relatively absolute) value lies in the fact that they make Jesus present again; they re-present him. The most inherent, authentic, individual and unique thing about people is their personal reference to Jesus Christ. The principle of equality and unity among the members of the human race has its foundation in Jesus Christ, and we are more closely linked to him in life than to Adam in death. People's earthly destiny is not to live for life's sake alone; to work, love, reproduce, master the world. Rather it is to share their life with God's life and to walk together with him. A person's vocation and destiny is an ongoing and constantly renewed call to communion with others and with God.

Rm. 8:39  
Ph. 3:21  
2 Co. 3:18.

1 Co. 15:22ff;  
Gn 1:26, 28; 2:25

## Human Activity and Earthly Work

Gn 2:17-19;  
1:28ff  
Gn 2:1-3

Although the Scriptures speak of work as a burden imposed on humans as a consequence of their sin, the message in its origin presents earthly work as a divine mission: people reproduce the image of God, who worked for six days and rested on the seventh.

In the Bible, people did not appear by spontaneous generation, nor do they form part of the decoration, like a figure in a Nativity scene. They are not allowed to waste their time; they have a specific job to do. Their work ennobles them, and they can consecrate and sanctify their work, no matter how simple it is.

The problem with some young people is that they live as if they were absent (drugged); they have a key role to play in the history of humanity and they run away from it God cannot find them. They do not realize that history needs to be written by them. Their excuse is that social and political structures are responsible for the present situation, and while it is true that social structures are responsible for the situation people find themselves in, it is even truer that people are responsible for their structures. People are not just victims... they also answer for their own circumstances...

And of course, at the heart of the matter is God, who is responsible for people's responsibility. At the heart of the matter is not so much people's faith in God, but God's faith in people. God has entrusted the world, history and the earth, to people. People may

not take God seriously, but God takes people seriously. We cannot blame God for the bad shape the world is in; what we could "blame" him for is having given people such an important role to play...

Human activity is not just that which is transcendent and definitive in history. The value of a person's life does not come from those isolated and infrequent moments of grandeur, importance or transcendence, but from the ongoing effort... What is valuable is the secret meaning of little things; simple, inconspicuous insignificant things the transcendent value of what goes unnoticed, the importance of the unimportant, the eternal meaning of that which is fleeting. What counts is the love that we put into what we do. Effort and dedication often count for more in God's eyes than success and perfection. God looks into people's hearts and is not deceived by hypocrisy. God is an imperative of human authenticity.

This Biblical theology of humanity is intended to be an elementary grammar for the man and the woman in the street, for working people. The idea is to value everyday people, to discover the holiness of the simple life.

Christian life teaches us that giving food, drink and shelter; clothing and visiting -in other words, doing ordinary work- has a transcendent and absolutely important meaning, and represents a golden opportunity for establishing a personal relationship with Jesus by reaching out to those who need us.

Mt. 25:34

What counts the most in Christian living, more than isolated sins or virtues or extraordinary actions, is the

overall orientation of the person's life, the light that illuminates all these seemingly insignificant actions. There really is no such thing as an empty act, and every moment represents an extraordinary opportunity. And just as people are not alone in what they are, they are also not alone in what they do. They always have God as their companion, participant and witness.

Col. 3:17;  
1 Co. 10:31

In the Bible, work is a holy thing. It is what people owe to the world and to others; it is what is supposed to keep people busy. Idlers are never praised in the Bible, and poverty born of laziness is no virtue.

Work should be something that fulfills the person; it should be a means for developing skills, for applying knowledge. Work is meant to make the person more human.

Work represents the person's means of subsistence. It should be sufficient and proportionate to ensure the person's development and livelihood. If the ox that is treading out the grain has a right to eat, all the more reason to recognize the rights of the working person.

*Nobody ever planted a vineyard and refused to eat the fruit of it.*

*Who has there ever been who kept a flock and did not feed on the milk?* ( 1 Co. 9:9)

On the other hand, Saint Paul also says:

*Do not let anyone have food if he refuses to work.* (2 Th. 3:10)

No matter how simple, work should provide the means for a simple and dignified life. If work is not



given its fair value and compensation, then the underlying structure needs to be transformed.

Work is sacred, because it is an important part of life and God is sensitive to people's life and work. We live to work, but we also work to live and to enjoy life. Some people work feverishly in order to eat, but then, because they have enslaved themselves to their work, they do not have time to sit down and share a meal with their children.

The work that is praised in Scripture is not the work that enslaves people. People are supposed to find God in their work; in particular, their work is meant to serve Jesus.

Work is also a danger that can end up absorbing and suffocating life. Everyone condemns laziness, but overwork often goes unnoticed.

In Scripture, God shows himself as He who works and rests. The Sabbath rest is the way that Hebrews- and even beasts of burden- took a break from their work. That is why, among other things, God wants people to interrupt their labor, renew their strength, and take time to lift up their eyes. Earthly chores should not take over a person's life. The Sabbath precept is meant to free people from their own work. God's people, which is all people, should not be slaves of anyone or anything. The fundamental purpose of the Sabbath is to break the alienating hold that work has over us. The Sabbath serves to keep people from thinking that their worth comes from what they do; their being and their undertaking are two different things. A world that values people according to the job

Col. 3:24

Gn. 2:13

C. Tresmontant,  
Essay on  
Hebrew Thought

they do is not a humane world; it is a mechanized world.

In the framework of Christian life, the Sunday rest frees people from their jobs.

Mt. 13:22;  
Mk.4:19;  
Lk. 8:14;  
Mt. 6:25;  
Lk. 12:22

To Jesus' way of thinking, the worries of the world, immersion in the world and the seduction of riches can end up strangling the word that he has sown. Worrying about life is not a Gospel value; it goes against trust in God. People should be responsible, but without going through life feeling anxious and worried. It is people who confer value on their job, or on the function they fulfill, and not the function or the job that confers value on people.

So, work is not a noble thing when it enslaves people.

*Leisure is what gives the scribe the opportunity to acquire wisdom;  
the man with few business affairs grows wise.  
How can the plowman become wise,  
whose sole ambition is wield the goad;  
driving his oxen, engrossed in their work,  
his conversation is of nothing but cattle?  
His mind is fixed on the furrows he traces,  
and his evenings pass in fattening his heifers.  
So it is with every workman and craftsman,  
toiling day and night...  
Constantly on the alert over his work,  
each flick of the finger premeditated;  
he pummels the clay with his arm,  
and puddles it with his feet;*

*he sets his heart on perfecting the glaze,  
and stays up cleaning the kiln.* (Si. 38:24-34)

Work can dull the mind and smother the spirit; it can drive people to place their trust in what they do, in which case their job becomes a kind of idol. In a world of idlers, or in a materialized world, it is important to emphasize the divine condition of work, but in a world where work tends to oppress people and threatens to smother them completely, there is a greater urgency in rescuing people from their work.

Jesus felt highly disappointed in those who, without doing anything unjust or wrong, were too busy to heed his call. Their fault lay in letting themselves be buried in the world.

Lk. 14:15;  
Mt. 22:2-10;  
Lk. 17:28

## **Constitution of the Human Person**

**+ The human person, made of earth and grounded in the earth**

Humans are made of earth, and thus are mortal. In the Old Testament, dying means going back to the earth from which the person came.

*You shall live until you return to the soil,  
as you were taken from it.  
For dust you are  
and to dust you shall return.* (Gn. 3:19)

People are part of creation. That is why they are of the earth and linked to all other creatures. That is also why they are mortal.

The first person, Adam, was not the only one to be made of clay: the earth is the origin of all people.

*The same end awaits us all.  
All originate from the dust  
and to the dust all return.* (Qo. 3:20)

And if our end is dust, it is because our origin was dust.

*The Lord fashioned man from the earth,  
to consign him back to it.* (Si 17:1)

*All men come from the ground,  
Adam himself was formed out of earth.* (Si 33:10)

The words 'earth', 'soil', 'ground', etc. do not indicate the actual material people are made of; only Adam was formed out of soil, and yet people are in essence of the earth. The words refer to people's essential humility. Abraham, for example, recognizes that he is but dust and ashes, and nevertheless dares to address God. The Psalmist also recognizes his origin in the earth. The reality of death directs our gaze to the earth, and to humility.

Gn. 18:27

Ps. 103:14

Gn. 2:7; 3:19  
Ph. 2:6ff  
Rm. 5:12ff

The man of dust from the soil in Genesis foreshadows the man announced in the New Testament. God's power, wisdom and splendor are revealed, along with the fruitfulness of the earth, in Jesus, who is God and also a man made of clay. God,

who is invisible and spiritual, is revealed in an earthly, visible man.

+ **The human person is made of flesh** and therefore is weak, small and fleeting. Flesh emphasizes people's weakness and sickness. Flesh characterizes animals, and the word is used in this way 104 times in Scripture. To refer to people, it is used 169 times. The expression often refers to the whole person, or to all people.

Ps. 63:2; 78:39

*Cry!  
And I answered, "What shall I cry?"  
"All flesh is grass  
and its beauty like the wild flower's.  
The grass withers, the flower fades  
when the breath of Yahweh blows on them.  
The grass is without doubt the people.  
The grass withers, the flower fades,  
but the word of our God  
remains forever."* (Is. 40:6-8)

When it is written, for example, that the Word became flesh, the idea is that Jesus became like an ordinary person- completely human, vulnerable, mortal, weak.

Jn. 1:14

The human person seen as flesh needs God's power in order to be more than flesh. Basar in Hebrew, and Sarkx in Greek, mean flesh and refer to the whole person, with no sexual connotation implied.

+ **The human person has God's life** and thus is sacred. God's breath is the force that infuses life into the person.

Gn. 2:7

Lk 19:11

The living God is behind or in people, keeping them alive. The people of Israel believed that life, which comes from God, was in the blood and flowed through the blood; thus it was forbidden to drink or spill blood, and people were not allowed to touch human blood. That is why in ritual sacrifices, God was offered what most belonged to him, life, blood.

Ps 88:4ff

People have a soul, a life force (*Nefes*), which is why they can feel, as animals do. Animals are alive in the same way that people are, but their lives do not have the same value.

Gn. 9:3ff

*Nefes*, often ill-translated as 'soul', refers to that which makes people living beings, with God's life in them. It is what describes them most fully, and sets them apart from other beings.

*Yahweh God fashioned man of dust from the soil. Then he breathed into his nostrils a breath of life, and thus man became a nefes, a living being.* (Gn. 2:7)

People live thanks to God's life. The divine breath makes them live in a way no other living being lives. Even in strictly natural terms, human life is divine, which is why it cannot be sacrificed, or bought, or sold.

Gn. 2:19;  
1 Co 15:45-49

God is not pleased by people's death, but by their life. And when he gives life, he gives it forever. People, being made of earth like the animals, are mortal. But since they have also received God's life, they are transcendent. The divine breath is what makes people human; it is what sets them apart from animals.

God wants people to be alive and free; they were made to live in freedom. That is why when people are enslaved, God is deeply pained. The enslavement of people rouses God's passion; his option is human freedom.

+ **The human person is spirit** and thus is moved by the divine force. Ruah in Hebrew means breath, spirit, life force; it is a concept that corresponds more to God than to people. People are merely repositories or receivers of God's spirit. God's energy is in people, making them think, feel, and act in the right way.

*Were Yahweh to recall his Ruah, his breath,  
to draw his breathing back to himself,  
things of flesh would perish all together  
and man would return to dust.* (Jb. 34:14ff)

*God, create a clean heart in me,  
put into me a new and constant spirit,  
do not banish me from your presence,  
do not deprive me of your holy spirit.* (Ps. 51:10-11)

The spirit is the creative life force. People are, so to speak, beings inspired by God in that they carry God's creative inspiration inside.

Ps. 104:29ff

All of these terms serve to describe the human person, but not to define her; they are aspects of the whole reality, which is why they are interchangeable in Hebrew poetry.

Psalm 84, for example, says:

*How my soul yearns and pines  
for Yahweh's courts!*

*My heart and my flesh sing for joy  
to the living God.*

(Ps. 84:2)

+ **The human person is sin** and thus needs God. People's sin is evident in their inclination to evil, abuse, deceit and selfishness.

Gn. 3:1ff

The Bible portrays people as inherently flawed, with a kind of fundamental sin that is part of their make-up. Traditionally we speak of original sin; the term conceives of present-day people in terms of their origin. This fundamental deficiency is explained as a lack of obedience, in other words, a lack of recognition, of acceptance. The fall of Adam and Eve, which takes place in a special poetic setting, does not refer to a historical reality in the strict sense of the word. Rather, it expresses a peculiar truth about people of all times, that they are fundamentally out of joint, incongruent, divided. The disobedience of our first parents signifies people's inadequacy in the ultimate sense of their existence, in their relationship of obedience to God. Obedience, in the final analysis, is recognition, and sin is lack of recognition. It is disharmony, inauthenticity.

*The ox knows its owner,  
and the ass its master's crib.*

(Is. 1:3)

*Even the stork in the sky knows the appropriate  
season;*

*turtledove, swallow, crane,  
observe their time of migration.*

*And my people do not know the ruling of Yahweh!*

(Jr. 8:7)



In the prophets' eyes, the drama revolves around Israel's not recognizing: the chosen people do not recall.

The sin that is inherent to people's make-up, original sin, consists of the impossibility of loving God with all their heart, with all their soul and with all their strength, and of loving others the same way. This is why people are at odds with their own destiny, with themselves, with God, with others and with the world. Their situation is tragic, not at all as it ought to be. People are substantially flawed, and incapable of overcoming their situation, of transcending or saving themselves by their own efforts. Their entire person needs God.

Concupiscence refers to the disorder and inner discord of all human passions, and not just, or exclusively, the disorder of sexual passion. Concupiscence consists of disordered love of oneself, while ignoring or trampling on others and on God's love. We can also say that concupiscence consists of a lack of recognition. The term 'sin' does not adequately capture the reality we refer to when we speak of fundamental sin. Sin normally refers to something that happens; in this case it is not an action, a happening, but a condition, the state in which people find themselves.

Original sin is not understood here simply as something that happens, but rather as something that is and remains, in spite of people's efforts. Original sin is the flawed human condition; it is what is received and is transmitted. This is why people are born sinners: You know I was born guilty, a sinner from the moment of conception.

Ps. 51:7

Since we are what we ought not to be, we also do what we ought not to do. This is why we need a complete transformation of our being. This is what we could call a rebirth. Guilt lies in the act, but the root of our guilt is in our very being, in our essence and existence, in our life, because our actions follow from our being alive. Thus our original sin is really that fundamental sin that does not let us be authentic. Sin can be understood here as a kind of disagreement with oneself. A person's life inevitably conceals a sense of tragedy.

**+ The human person is word**

One of the distinctive characteristics of human beings in the Bible is their capacity to relate, especially to God. For people, God is a being who expresses himself. His expression is nature, history, and his words. The word is what unites God to people, and it is also what unites people to God. The God of the Bible is a God who made everything with his word. A God who is powerful in word and in deed, who pronounced human beings and pronounced in their favor, who expects a response from them in terms of 'thou', who accompanies them forever.

Philosophical, rational, intellectual, logical and coherent people do not appear in the Bible; all of those aspects are included in their logos, that is, in their word. People in the Bible are people who speak. People are words, and fulfill themselves by speaking. Their word is the element of communion with others who are like them, and also with nature. They relate to their companions in a thousand ways, but one of the most important, perhaps the most fundamental, is through words. Dialogue is the way men and women

relate. All of the other signs serve to reinforce the authenticity of their words.

Even though people express themselves in words, no one does so completely. People who express themselves are incapable of doing it fully, *their words can cause misunderstanding*; they can have multiple meanings. The word is no more than a sign, and the meaning is the human person, in all his wealth and in all his misery.

People in the Bible communicate with God. Because God has spoken to people, people can speak to God; the Thou that is God implies the thou that is the human person. And the thou of one person implies the we of all of us, because we all participate in the dignity of a single individual. When one person talks with God, it is as if everyone were communicating with him.

All people are the diverse word of God, and Jesus is the one, unique word. He is the word that comprises everything, that summarizes everything, that means everything. He is the Word, the Logos, of God, the total expression of God. Saint Irenaeus said that after God pronounced his word in Jesus, he was left speechless. This does not signify an inability on God's part, but rather his total and definitive expression in Jesus.

It is important to remember what the concept 'word' means in Hebrew theology in order to comprehend the eternal meaning of Jesus as God's Logos. In a reflection tinged with Greek thought, logos meant reason, word and sense. For Saint Paul, Jesus was the power and wisdom of God.

Saint Exupery  
The Little  
Prince

Gn. 2:8ff

Gn. 18:16ff;  
Ex. 33:12ff

Saint John of  
the Cross,  
Ascent, L II,  
Chap. 22, n. 4

Is. 55:10ff;  
Ps. 107:20  
1 Co. 1:24

Mk. 12:30

In the creation, the human person is God's last word, the word that completed everything. But Adam as word was a mere echo of what was to come. The definitive, final word, the total expression of God, is Jesus. Saint Irenaeus says that every word the Prophets uttered was the Word of God becoming accustomed to people, until the time came in which it found its full expression in Jesus.

The Letter to the Hebrews begins as follows:

*At various times in the past and in various different ways, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets; but in our own time, the last days, he has spoken to us through his Son, the Son that he has appointed to inherit everything and through whom he made everything there is.* (Heb. 1:1-3)

The human dimension is the point of contact with God and with others. The human person is a light that can say or mean something that enlightens the lives of others. God communicates himself in the best way possible. And the person of Jesus, in the words of the evangelist, is the Word of God. This is John's opening statement about Jesus. Jesus is God's word for humanity, and humanity is Jesus' expression (word) for others.

People are always being called on to speak; they are always expected to offer a word. For the same reason, people are always being called on to listen; they are always expected to respond.

People are intelligent; they are rational because they are capable of listening.

*Listen, Israel, you shall love Yahweh,  
your God, with all your heart...* (Dt. 6:4-5)

Hearing is very important for listening, understanding and loving with all one's heart. If people do not listen, it is as if they did not understand or love. It is necessary to love with all your soul and with *all your mind*. Mark brings the strength of intelligence to the commandment of love. When people love foolishly, they really do not love at all. Loving intelligently means procuring the means to love always, to love more, to educate in love; it refers to the way of loving, and not to a kind of cold and calculating love.

Gn. 1:27

*Because people are words,  
they must keep quiet and listen.  
Be silent, Israel, and listen.  
Today you have become a people for Yahweh,  
your God.  
You must listen to the voice of Yahweh,  
your God.* (Dt. 27:9)

The fundamental attitude of intelligent people is one of listening.

*Every morning Yahweh wakes me to hear,  
to listen like a disciple.* (Is. 50:4)

*Yahweh, may my cry approach your presence;  
let your word endow me with perception!* (Ps. 119:169)

People do not know everything, as Plato thought when he said that learning was no more than remembering. We are all called to learn constantly, to receive

information from outside of us and to assimilate it like a treasure.

All people have the right to learn, but people can lose that right if they close themselves off from life, or from history, but mostly from other people. The only thing that is absolutely certain is that no one is absolutely right.

## Meaning of Human Sexuality

Gn. 3:7

And God created man in his image and likeness, and to elucidate this creative act, the Scriptures add, in the plural: *male and female he created them*.

Human life, in its origin, in its duration and in its destiny, is sacred; it is participation in divine life, even on the natural plane. And sexuality, like life, is a gift from God that brings us into a special relationship with him, with others, with the world, and with ourselves. Recognizing, accepting and appreciating our own sexuality, as opposed to denying it, fearing it or deforming it, is a source of divine hope.

The non-acceptance of one's own sexuality or that of another person, or disrespect toward a gendered person, i.e., not seeing their condition of man or woman as something natural and sacred, goes against the Biblical image of the human person.

*It is not good that the man should be alone. I will make him a helpmate.* (Gn. 2:18)

This way of presenting the human person implies that any kind of selfish isolation is contrary to God's plan. The human person needs a helpmate, not for this or that specific task, but rather for living a full human life. Adam needed a woman not just to have children and to face the challenges he would find in the world; he needed her in order to be authentically human. The clarification male and female is linked to the creative act itself, it is inherent to the condition of creature. Sexual reciprocity (I-thou) is a gift from God, a good thing that he wants us to have.

In other words, the human person by nature is not a solitary being. Gender, the fact of being a man or a woman, orients us inherently to the other. We can never understand the human person in his or her totality, unless we consider this structural openness to the other whose very difference allows the person to establish his or her identity. The decisive element is not the attraction a man feels for a woman, or vice versa; it is the fact that an individual, in his male-ness or in her female-ness, establishes a reciprocal relationship with an individual of the opposite sex.

God is very jealous of people's sexuality (of its integrity, of its exercise, of love...), as he is of people's freedom and people's religiosity. And God has given us sexual pleasure as something inherently good, something that he wants us to have, as long as it does not enslave us, or trample on the rights of others, and as long as it is integrated into a whole set of values.

It should be pointed out that pleasure does not make the exercise of sexuality good or bad. The gratification or aversion that a person feels when

doing something, does not make that thing good or bad. The ideal of Christian living is to take pleasure in doing what is right.

Sexuality, like life, belongs to a process of development, of searching, and of encounter with oneself and with others; its aim is to confer meaning on the act of giving oneself to another person, and to keep the relationship alive.

The first chapters of Genesis show us a couple that lives their sexuality in concord and tranquility. The verse from Chapter II takes on special significance:

*Now both of them were naked,  
the man and his wife,  
but they felt no shame in front of each other.*

(Gn. 2:25)

But after this chapter comes the story of the temptation and the disobedience that we have called original sin. One of the first consequences *was that the eyes of both of them were opened and they realized that they were naked. So they sewed fig leaves together to make themselves loincloths.*

Gn. 2:18

What this says is that the deep meaning of sexuality refers to the original harmony that existed between a man and a woman, whereby a man would always be a man in his relationship with his helpmate, woman, and a woman would always be a woman in her relationship with her helpmate, man. Neither would try to use the other, or look on the other from a deviant perspective. There would be no malice, or shame, or fear, or defensiveness. Both of them were naked, which means they



were the way they were, the way God wanted them to be, the way he had made them. The real, historical situation, however, is marked by sin: it is fundamentally flawed, fallen, wounded. Sexual life no longer constitutes a peaceful, trouble-free legacy for human beings.

To the Hebrew way of thinking, the most profound and ultimate meaning of things is to be found in their origin. In this framework, therefore, the term 'original' means something like 'fundamental' or 'essential'.

Sin has affected people in the most intimate part of their being. This original wound or injury means that people have to be on their guard, to keep from becoming an object of a selfish "I" that denies the existence of "thou" as subject.

The consequences of original sin, which are best thought of not as a punishment or revenge from God but rather as the historical situation of people today, seem to point to a situation in which the harmony, order and integrity described in the first chapters of Genesis no longer belong to the ordinary state of affairs. They are more like an ideal, a personal attainment or acquisition. The relational meaning of sexuality is now subject to this law, and what is in essence fundamental human nature now must be obtained through constant struggle and striving. The reality of sexuality must be created among people, and sought out among instinctive drives that can easily become misguided.

The Bible does not offer an absolute guide regarding sex. Specific instructions conditioned by a particular structural setting, cannot be taken as valid for all times and places. It is true that the Bible is a book that speaks to people today, but it was written in very remote times. Sacred Scripture is not a manual of ethics. The Bible makes a wide diversity of claims about sex, and demands certain model behaviors. In the Bible, sex is one aspect of human life, neither despised nor exalted, because it is not considered in isolation. It is a part of the whole person.

Gn. 2:24

The second (Yahwist) version of creation in Genesis establishes a link between sexuality and human solitude. *It is not good that the man should be alone. I will make him a helpmate.* People who are lonely feel helpless, and the only solution is company. The first purpose of sexuality, as the Yahwist describes it, is reciprocity, mutual belonging. When a man joins himself to his wife and they become one body, their relationship reflects a mission that is much more profound than mere physical juxtaposition. In the first narration of creation, the priestly version, which is more recent, sexuality is a gift from God linked to the commandment to be fruitful and multiply. Thus it is a responsibility that human beings have toward creation. If women and men share with God the act of creating, along with mastery over life (even though it continues being God's), then they are also called to share his providence.

God wants people to act as human beings, that is, consciously, responsibly and freely. The sacred and transcendent dimension of human sexuality, and the

dignity of its purpose, demand a certain level of knowledge, awareness, responsibility and freedom.

Sexuality is not given only for interpersonal communication, or exclusively for satisfaction, happiness or personal well-being. Nor is it given solely for procreation.

The purposes of sexuality are multiple. And not all of them necessarily have to be pursued or achieved in every act. The main purposes of sexuality are:

- a) **People's identity** and their development as human persons, in a way that benefits each individual as a man or a woman;
- b) **Their fulfillment as persons**, which includes all the different ways of seeing, thinking and acting, and of relating to others as a woman or a man.
- c) **Their interpersonal communication**, the relationship and reciprocal encounter of thou and I as a relationship of knowledge, love and mutual self-giving in freedom.
- d) **Procreation** in favor of a third party who is the fruit of their reciprocal love and who renews it, commits it, stabilizes it, blesses and sanctifies it even more.

We could narrow the purposes of sexuality down to four main points:

**A) Identity**

In chronological terms, the most important function of sexuality is the individual's own identity and development, which means that the one who suffers the most from sexual disorders and improprieties is the individual himself.

Problems having to do with functioning or physical development are best treated by a good physician; education and pedagogy are the responsibility of parents, teachers and counselors, and in a certain significant way, depend on the environment. Normally, success is primarily up to the individual. More than anyone else, the individual is responsible for her own development and maturity. In this area, as in many others, people should be helped, but not forced. People reach sexual maturity by making a series of decisions, not by coercion.

**B) Fulfillment:**

Men and women feel more confident, more fulfilled, happier and less selfish when they live their sexuality in a healthy way. Healthy sexuality is something that people experience before marriage, when they are single; within marriage, as husband and wife, and parents; and outside of marriage, in human relations in general, on the job, and in celibacy. Sexual maturity, in any marital status, aside from being a personal ideal, is a social need. Everyone benefits when a person is sexually mature, and in a certain way, everyone loses when a person is immature.

**C) Interpersonal communication:**

Women and men have the original and natural tendency, as well as the divine commandment, to seek each other out on a sexual plane. This implies a deep, and natural, longing that must be satisfied if spouses are to obtain the reward of a harmonious life together and a meaningful dialogue.

Marital communion presupposes a communion of life, of reciprocal responsibilities; the more the mar-

ried couple assumes these responsibilities, the greater the fruit they will obtain. The communication of life also demands a way of thinking, loving and acting that is shared and cordial.

The ability of parents to enjoy the crowning achievement of their relationship has a huge impact on the family group as a whole, on the work they do and on everyone they come into contact with.

**D) Procreation:**

Children are the culmination of a mature marital relationship. The right time for children is when the couple has overcome all the little difficulties of their early encounters, and they have achieved sufficient stability in terms of awareness, responsibility and freedom; in other words, when they have reached a certain level of human maturity that allows for responsible parenting.

Bringing offspring into the world is something that all living things do, and animals do it as often as they can. Humans are unique, however, in the extraordinary levels of care that they provide for their children. Of all living things, human beings are the ones that need their parents the most. Children need their parents until they are adults, and it is not uncommon for that need to last even longer. As a result, everything that keeps parents together means greater protection for children, and well-being for the family as a whole.

Fatherhood and motherhood demand personal as well as shared responsibility. Having a child should not be an accident; it requires a high level of maturity

in both parents, who must be capable of adaptation in order to offer their children a stable presence and a supporting environment.

Having children should not be seen as a way to solve marital problems, or as a strategy for holding on to someone. Children do sometimes end up solving problems in certain marriages, but they should not be considered medicine for a sick relationship.

It is not enough for human life to spring forth naturally, because the life in this case is human. It needs direction and meaning, it needs attention and care, it needs to be defended as something tremendously valuable. The value of life does not lie only in the genetic component, but also in the human context, in the values that are passed on. It is clear that many people value the reasons for living more than life itself. These reasons for living are what make some people heroes. When human life is given, it is also necessary to provide a horizon, a direction, a life-giving medium.

Civilization, culture, the Church and the human species itself are generally preserved through the family. It is important for people blessed with health, character and human values to reproduce and pass on their heritage, their environment and the values that give meaning to life and death. This is a duty and a privilege of the person who is fully human; gender alone is not sufficient.

# 2 Meaningful Moments of Human Life

## Fecundation

*The man knew his wife, Eve,  
and she conceived  
and gave birth to Cain.  
"I have acquired a man  
with the help of Yahweh," she said.* (Gn. 4:1)

In the Hebrew mindset, knowing does not mean observing and registering in the mind. It had more to do with encountering, experiencing, participating. Thus it is through lived experience that a person comes to know suffering, childlessness, God's power and love, and his demands. In the same way a man knows his wife, and she her husband.

In the Old Testament, knowing means finding yourself committed to a certain history and consenting to that commitment. It is not just the mind that is at stake, it is the whole person. The opposite of knowing is disobedience, defiance, autonomy, denying the reality that is the foundation of truth, and denying oneself. Not knowing means refusing to acknowledge someone.

Biblical knowledge implies love, and deep, full knowledge is attained when deep, full love is reached. *"It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye."* *"What is essential is*

Is. 53:3  
Jr. 22:15ff  
Is. 48:7  
Jr. 16:21

Saint Exupéry  
The Little Prince,  
Chap. XXI



*invisible to the eye,"* the little prince repeated, so that he would be sure to remember.

Cf. Lk. 11:27

Adam knew Eve, and Eve became pregnant. To the Hebrew way of thinking, a woman's function was fundamentally passive due to elemental biology. The woman's role basically came down to offering a suitable place for the man's semen. Nevertheless, it is the place where God does his work, a paradise. It is there where a new and unique person will appear.

*Just as you do not know the way of the wind  
or the mysteries of the woman with child,  
no more can you know the work of God who is behind  
it all.* (Qo. 11:5)

Gn. 2:7, 22

God's favor is what makes a woman conceive. And the new being is the fruit of the combined action of the man, the woman and God. The first man was formed out of the soil, the first woman from the man's rib, and everyone else from the man and woman's most intimate and delicate parts and from their heart.

God's action is just as important in the first man as in all of his descendants. Each fecundation is a new creation.

*The mother of the Maccabees says to her sons:  
I do not know how you appeared in my womb;  
it was not I who endowed you with breath and life,  
I had not the shaping of your every part.  
It is the creator of the world,  
ordaining the process of man's birth  
and presiding over the origin of all things,*

*who in his mercy will most surely give you back  
both breath and life.* (2M. 7:22-23)

The human person is a miracle, and begins to be as much from the moment of her fecundation. She is the fruit of love, of the love that is enshrined in the relationship between her progenitors, and most of all, of God's love.

To be more precise, it should be noted that God's action is not a factor that is simply added to the action of the progenitors. The relationship exists at a more profound level. In a number of ways, the new human being depends totally and absolutely on his father (all of his being is his father's son), and at the same level, on his mother (all of his being is his mother's son); at a level that is just as personal and yet more profound, the new human being depends on God.

We could say that whereas human love can come up short for the new human being, God's love pours forth.

The human being is an absolutely unique miracle. Your father put out over 400 million sperm cells endowed with a fierce drive to reach their final goal. Any one of them could have been your sister or your brother, as similar to you as a twin, and yet not you. Only you stayed the course until you found the other half of yourself that came from your mother. From that encounter of you with yourself, your life began.

God's prevision, predilection, pre-election and providence took form in you in your vital signs. This is not to dismiss the dynamism of nature; on the

contrary, it can be seen as the noblest expression of God's care for human beings, the apex of the pyramid that is nature. Your heart began to work, and would beat over 20 million times before your birth. There were more cells in that small brain, still incapable of thinking, than there are people living in the entire world, and each one of those cells had a precise function. Millions and millions of cells began to live in an organized way, governed by a unique and personal life principle- you. The life that began at that point was the seed, or the pledge, of an eternal life. Life is something that proceeds directly from God and from a person's parents. When God gave you life, he gave it to you for real and forever.

Lk.1:35ff

The virginal conception of Jesus highlights God's special intervention. The message is primarily about Jesus' condition and his unique relationship as Son of God, and secondarily, about Mary. God also intervened miraculously, although in a different way, in the conception of John the Baptist, of Isaac, of Samuel and of Samson. The conception of each person, even when not miraculous, is an event that is linked to God, the origin of life.

Lk. 1:7;  
Gn. 18:13;  
1 S 1:2; 2:5;  
Jg. 13:2-5

The very fact of having been conceived is a natural miracle: God has enabled an incalculable series of possible conditions to take place, each and every one of those that were necessary to lead up to you.

These reflections should not be taken as an attempt to reveal the secrets of nature, but rather the secret of God who encompasses nature. We are not trying to relate biological facts, but to present a kind of meta-biology, that is, to discover what is behind these facts.

The fact of having been conceived means that God has not grown tired of being good to people, and that he wants to continue being good, not just in history in general, but in your own particular history. It means that God's love is eternal and is handed down from parents to children. In each person, God feels touched in his most personal identity: his Fatherhood.

## Gestation

The fact that a person is developing inside the womb means that God wants to give birth to a new testimony of his solicitude, his presence and his love. It is a time of preparation, and what is being prepared is a human person. It is a time of expectation, and what is being expected is a new being. While the woman waits, there is nothing the husband can do but wait along with her. A woman's pregnancy calls on both to assume an attitude of hopefulness. Genesis affirms that everything that God made, and especially human beings, was very good. For parents, gestation is a time of confidence, of joy and of hope; for each one of us who have been born, our very life bears witness to the fact that the Lord has been incredibly good to us.

Gn. 1:31

Ps. 125:2

The image of the woman knitting with her hands is a typical symbol of expectant waiting. All of her hopes, her joy and her confidence are reflected in the garment, knitted seamlessly from a single strand of yarn. This is the image that Sacred Scripture often uses to speak of God's activity and his affection for what he is forming in a mother's womb. Psalm 139 says:

*It was you (Yahweh) who created my innermost self,  
and put me together in my mother's womb;  
for all these mysteries I thank you:  
for the wonder of myself, for the wonder of your works.  
You know me through and through,  
from having watched my bones take shape  
when I was being formed in secret,  
knitted together in the depths of the earth.  
You had scrutinized my every action... (Ps. 139:13ff)*

And Psalm 71:5-6 says:  
*For you alone are my hope, Lord,  
Yahweh, I have trusted you since my youth,  
I have relied on you since I was born,  
you have been my portion from my mother's womb.*

What takes shape hidden from sight is God's work; that is why only he who forms the human person in secret knows her in her entirety and from the beginning. His eyes see the embryo, and his solicitude is, so to speak, proportional to the size of the person. The allusion to the depths of the earth is noteworthy, the place where the body in formation is being knitted together. The idea is that the human person rises out of the earth, like Adam, and like a seed is associated with the depths of the earth and the mother's womb: *Naked I came from my mother's womb, naked shall I return to the mother of them all.*

Jb. 1:21  
Si 40:1

When God made Adam out of clay, he was thinking that thereafter he would continue doing the same thing in the mother's womb.

*Thus says Yahweh, your redeemer,  
he who formed you in the womb:*

*I, myself, Yahweh, made all things,  
I alone spread out the heavens.  
When I gave the earth shape, did anyone help me?*  
(Is. 44:24)

The image of the potter also evokes the human person as a creation of God's hands, made of clay from the earth. Job says to God:

*You modeled me, remember, as clay is modeled...  
Did you not pour me out like milk,  
and curdle me then like cheese;  
clothe me with skin and flesh,  
and weave me of bone and sinew?  
And then you endowed me with life,  
watched each breath of mine with tender care.*  
(Jb. 10:9-12)

Isaiah says:  
*And yet, Yahweh, you are our Father,  
we the clay, you the potter,  
we are all the work of your hand.* (Is. 64:7)

What these images convey is that God is present and active, with parents and in parents, involved in the wonderful work of procreation, interweaving out of one and the other a new child. The time of waiting is a time of confidence and intimate union with him.

A naturalistic biologist contemplating all of this would say that there is nothing special to marvel at. Gestation is a natural process, after all. It is what you expect after a successful conception. And that is precisely what is marvelous. God and nature are not mutually exclusive or opposed elements. Nature is the

Mt. 6:26ff

place to find God, to admire him and the worship him. If it is wonderful that the sun rises every morning, or that a flower blooms, how much more wonderful is it that a human person is born?

Even more than Scripture, nature is the place where God manifests himself. The word of God is a gift that helps us to live our lives in a more profound way. This is the field where we should look for him; we might say that it is more important to find God in nature than in the supernatural, the miraculous or the sacramental.

Science sets out to discover, not to invent what God has been doing from the beginning.

The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is the God and Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and Our own Father; the God of the history of salvation is the God of my own history. And the God of people and history is the God of nature, and the way to hear him is to open our eyes and our heart. The natural world provides a window or a stairway, not a wall.

Si. 38:6

*The Lord has given men learning so that they may glory in his mighty works, says the Holy Scripture.*

Saint Augustine remarked that miracles serve to point out what God, in Jesus and through Jesus, has been doing from the beginning.

## Birth

*The miracle that Jesus performed by turning water into wine does not cause any special admiration among those who know what he does on a daily basis. The one who made wine in the jars at Cana is the same one who year after year makes grapes ripen on the vine. We are no longer surprised by that because it happens every year and the sheer frequency of it makes it seem ordinary. And yet it is worthier of reflection than any miracle. The potential of a seed is so great that it astonishes the angels. But people, distracted as they are by so many things, do not consider the wonders of God. He wished to perform miracles so that people would wake up and recognize him in nature.*

*A dead man comes back to life, and people are astonished!*

*Thousands of babies are born every day, and no one bats an eye!*

*And yet, the fact that someone who did not exist before begins to live is more of a miracle than bringing back to life someone who already lived.*

Saint Agustinen.

Our question does not have to do with God's existence, but with our own. What does it mean that I exist? What does it mean to have been born? What does it mean that a new person is born?

Before approaching the mystery of our existence, we have to justify the mystery of our presence. Why am I here and now? To what purpose?



And recognizing God's action and presence in our own life is much more important than recognizing his existence.

We know many things, and we are good at making use of the laws of nature. We know that we are alive, and we know how to live well. But we do not know why we are alive, or to what purpose, or for whom.

We receive life as a gift, but we forget to say thank you. We owe something for having taken our first breath; for being able to feel and live; for heat, light and love; and for that great feat of ours: having been born. But what do we owe and to whom?

We spend our life acquiring information about it, but we lack inspiration. We have devices that measure the slightest sound down to fractions of decibels, but we lack music.

There is no lack of values; what is missing is people to discover them and live them. The whole world is a concert and the individual is the soloist. Except that he has forgotten the melody.

Being born is much more dynamic and existential than being a person. Being born means beginning to live: entering time. Life is the time we have been given. Having been born means that that time has begun.

*Man, born of woman,  
has a short life yet has his fill of sorrow.  
He blossoms and he withers, like a flower;  
fleeting as a shadow, transient.*

*He crumbles like rotten wood  
or a moth-eaten garment.*

(Jb. 14:1ff)

In the Bible, birth is a gift from God, and this life already is an encounter with him. It is to God that people owe their birth.

Cf. Jb. 10:12

People cannot understand themselves if they do not realize that they owe their existence to an event they were not consulted about. Their presence, their life, their existence are due to the loving will of God, who in the final analysis is responsible for people's presence. Being born means being put on the road to an encounter, with many risks.

Religious people know that their living has a sacramental sense and meaning. They know that they live for someone, and in the end, that someone is the Lord. *If we live, we live for the Lord*, but in more immediate terms, we live for others. And it is precisely by living for others that people live for God. And in order to live for others, people have to live for themselves. The survival instinct does not necessarily lead to selfishness; people can also strive to conserve their life in order to give it to others.

Rm. 14:8

We are given life to make good use of it, not to squander it. Even that which seems to be most ours—our own life, for which we would be willing to give up everything—we know is not really ours. Deep down, we are more stewards and witnesses than owners. We transmit life, we shepherd it, but we do not give it. What is most inherent to people does not really belong to them, and what is most personal includes a sense of otherness.

People who accept their life, and the fact of living, as a gift from God and a reference to him, as a way of participating in God's life, accept and live out the fundamental meaning of the cult of life. The most sacred thing people have is their life. And life is sacred because it belongs to God.

What links people to God is not so much being, as living. The God of the Bible is a living God; life is the strongest bond that people have to God.

At birth, people are given a certain personal freedom and identity. People are someone for someone. Birth means beginning to live one's own life. People come into this world, join their family, and should be welcomed into their home. People are associated with God and with Jesus not just by the fact of being human and God's creation, but also by the fact of existing and the way they start their existence. The presence of a new being will always allude to that being's parents and to God. Living and meaning are correlative terms.

Through his birth, Jesus of Nazareth has not only shared our way of existing, by starting life from the beginning; he also begins to exist in the world as someone distinct from the Father and from others, standing before the Father and before others.

Neither God nor others should constitute a threat to the person who is starting to exist. Even more than the parents themselves, God takes the greatest interest in a person's life.

## Development

The Biblical conception of time, of history and of vocation suggests, from the beginning, the idea of a progressive plan for the human person, a maturing, a development and a transformation. People are not born fully made; they are in process.

In the Encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, Paul VI writes: *In God's plan, every man is born to seek self-fulfillment, for every human life is called to some task by God. At birth a human being possesses certain aptitudes and abilities in germinal form, and these qualities are to be cultivated so that they may bear fruit. By developing these traits through formal education or personal effort, the individual works his way toward the goal set for him by the Creator. Endowed with intellect and free will, each man is responsible for his self-fulfillment even as he is for his salvation. He is helped, and sometimes hindered, by his teachers and those around him; yet whatever be the outside influences exerted on him, he is the chief architect of his own success or failure. Utilizing only his talent and willpower, each man can grow in humanity, enhance his personal worth, and perfect himself.*

People are made not as perfect, fully finished beings; they are made as beings who are capable of collaborating with God in his creative work. God makes them capable of making themselves. In this same sense we can think of people as made in the image and likeness of the Creator. If we think that people cannot make themselves, because only God is the Creator, we ignore God's desire to make us col-

Paul VI,  
Pop. Prog. No. 15

Cf. 1 Co. 3:9;  
Ph. 2:13; 4:13;  
Ep. 3:20;  
Col. 1:19;  
1 Co. 12:6

laborators in his work, not only outwardly, but even more so inwardly.

We can think of people as God's only conscious and responsible collaborators who, on a different level, contribute to God's action by making the world with their hands, imagining its future, reflecting on its history, and primarily, modeling themselves. All of this really does depend on people, which in no way hinders or takes away from God's action. We can think of people as responsible not only for what they do or what they have, but above all for what they are and what they do with themselves.

Their actions affect them decisively, determine their success or failure, fulfill them or pull them down. What they do is crucial to what they become. What would you do if you found a 20-year-old young man named Johann Sebastian Bach, and he wanted to give up music? You would say to him: You have everything you need to be great. You are johann sebastian bach, so act like Johann Sebastian Bach and you will become JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH. All you have to do is accept the responsibility of being the greatest musician ever. Johann sebastian bach was not Johann Sebastian Bach until after many hours of preludes, sonatas and fugues.

God has created the world, and yet, the world continues to make itself, invent itself, discover itself, rise out of unconsciousness and into consciousness. People are the authors of their life and their destiny. They are time-bound, and thus unfinished and unresolved. They must invent their fate, discover their own personal path. People's achievements are not just

passive or receptive, but active, inasmuch as people construct themselves by finding their vocation and giving their consent.

A individual's most wonderful encounter is with herself. Her greatest discovery is her own vocation. Her most heroic fidelity is being true to herself.

Human activity coexists with divine action: the latter sustains the former, sets it off and impels it to fulfillment. Divine action is present in human action. *It is in him that we live, and move, and exist*, and it is true the other way around as well: he lives in our living, acts in our action, and makes himself present in our existence. God's action acts in people's action in a way that shows respect and makes them truly free, because *it is God who puts both the will and the action into us* (and the fulfillment). God's power acts in human action: *There is nothing I cannot master with the help of the One who gives me strength*. Human action is not foreign to God's action; in a certain sense they are the same, only on different and irreducible levels that are nonetheless implicated in the same work.

Ac. 17:28

Ph. 2:13; 4:13

The most outstanding thing Jesus did was not so much what he did for others, but what he did with himself; not so much his action over things, but perhaps more importantly, his action on himself. If the human person is he who has the capacity to make himself, then no one has been as responsible for himself as Jesus; no one has fulfilled himself as Jesus has. The greatest thing Jesus has done is what he did with himself, what he made of himself.

The most important event that happens to people as they start their life, is that they grow.

## **Infancy**

Children are unfinished; they discover themselves little by little. They gradually learn to determine their lives and be free. Being free means doing something under one's own motivation. Self-determination means discovering and identifying with the motivation of one's own actions. Children slowly come to accept freely what they are meant to become.

Children need to learn to walk, talk, eat, fend for themselves, relate to others and make friends. They gradually discover the mystery of themselves by discovering the mystery of others, and this leads them to discover the mystery of God. It is the most human, everyday things that reveal God as a Father, and other people as brothers and sisters.

Children depend on others not just to meet their material needs, but above all, and most significantly, on the level of their personal being and their spiritual values. By discovering others, they discover their own existence and their unique value. They learn to give of themselves, and thereby come to know themselves. By accepting others and sharing what they are, they begin to live the meaning of their life and become a person psychologically.

By increasing their knowledge, their freedom and their love, children mature. They learn to be free by

choosing only what is good, because only choosing good makes people free. Choosing evil is a possibility within the scope of our freedom, but it does not perfect or fulfill our freedom; it perverts and destroys it. People who misuse their freedom end up being slaves to their own disorder.

Children learn to be conscious, to be present to themselves, to know themselves better. By asking who other people are, they are implicitly asking who they are themselves. By asking what other people are worth, they are asking about their own worth.

Little by little, people position themselves, they find their place in society and in the universe. They gradually learn that they do not determine history; they are, however, entrusted with a certain part of history. They know that reality is something they must accept, and that they are human to the extent that they accept history, make a commitment to it and desire their own transformation.

Children learn to control their passions. Learning does not presuppose error, it presupposes progress. Error occurs as an expression of our limitation. People come to have command over themselves painfully, through many errors, but these errors are not necessary, although they are frequent. They can be seen as a step backward in people's mastery of themselves.

Children learn to receive from others, to communicate and to receive the communication of others in intimacy and confidence. They are enriched by the riches of others, but without taking from them. They see what other people are like and accept them, there-



by coming to know and accept themselves for others. By serving others, they learn that it is possible to serve God. And service to God becomes the most profound dimension of authentic service to others.

Children little by little come to see that this world is not the way it ought to be; they themselves are not the way they ought to be. All of this should lead them to accept the limitations of others by accepting their own limitations. All children must learn, painfully, to put up with others. It is important to understand others, to be loyal and sincere. It is important to have the capacity to admire the values of others. Children who do this are on the road to becoming mature human beings. They are learning not to limit themselves to the phenomenological level, but to look into the heart.

The reality of things and the value of people are perceived with the heart. There are different ways of approaching reality: a person who observes Michelangelo's Pietà and calculates its weight as a block of white marble, or makes an analysis of its components or measures its volume, has not fully comprehended what the Pietà is. More than a heavy chunk of marble, it is a work of art. Although on the other hand, there is nothing of that work of art that is not sculpted in the marble.

Children learn that everything includes some beauty, goodness and truth, but they need to learn not to be distracted, but rather to concentrate, because just seeing things denies them the chance to value and love them.

In family life, children learn that love is shown and renewed in unity. There they learn that unity is not confusion, but rather coordination among people who relate to each other respectfully. They learn to communicate with others through signs and they use these signs to make themselves present. Signs, by referring to meaning and not fully revealing content, can be betrayed. Children learn to interpret their own signs and those of others.

Becoming an adult human being is quite a feat for children.

Jesus wished to become an adult man by starting out as a child. In infancy he discovered values that should last throughout people's life. He learned to call Yahweh his *Abba*: papa or daddy, and he wanted Christian life to be exactly like that of a son or a daughter, and he wanted people to treat each other as brothers and sisters. He took from human life the most profound message to speak to us about God. And he spoke of a God who takes an interest in the life of each and every person, and who makes people more authentic in the presence of the Father, of others and of themselves.

Cf. Lk. 2:39ff;  
Mt. 2:13ff; 7:7ff;  
6:25-34;  
Lk. 11:2-4

Infancy is a favorite image in Scripture to refer to growth, and to the relationship that both individuals in general, and the chosen people in particular, have with God.

*Is Ephraim, then, so dear a son to me,  
a child so favored,  
that after each threat of mine  
I must still remember him,  
still be deeply moved for him,*

*and let my tenderness yearn over him?  
It is Yahweh who speaks.* (Jr. 31:20)

*Does a woman forget her baby at the breast,  
or fail to cherish the son of her womb?  
Yet even if these forget,  
I will never forget you.* (Is. 49:15)

*As tenderly as a father treats his children,  
so Yahweh treats those who fear him;  
he knows what we are made of,  
he remembers we are dust.* (Ps. 103:13-14)

#### **NOTES ON FREEDOM AND FAILURE**

The perfection of freedom lies in desiring good so strongly and feeling so identified with it, that it becomes impossible to do evil. The possibility of doing evil is not really a power at all, but an imperfection of the will; not a strength but a weakness. True freedom consists of the possibility of doing good by loving it and giving oneself over to it fully, voluntarily, with no outside pressure.

Freedom does not consist of the possibility of doing evil. That is the risk of being free, not the perfection of freedom. Freedom consists of an inner principle of action by which we ourselves choose: no outside pressure moves us to love what is good and to commit ourselves to it, but rather a perfection of the will and an option for the good that we perceive and value from inside ourselves.

Freedom is also not indifference; in that case we could increase our freedom by becoming more and more neutral.

It is also not a case of feeling the same attraction to good as to evil. The fact is that from the beginning, our orientations are

divided, and our freedom allows us to tend toward good or toward evil. With respect to the good we have an essential and natural relationship, a continuous call from God. The person who looks for the good is a treasure of God on earth. Toward evil we have a deep-seated inclination by default, on account of a fundamental defect and absence. We are always deceived and duped to tend toward evil.

The essence of freedom lies not in the possibility of choosing evil, but in the fact of choosing good objectively, voluntarily and consciously. Choosing in itself has no intrinsic value; the value lies in choosing the right thing. The value lies in the object of the choice.

Thinking that error or wrong choices somehow help people is like trying to turn vice into virtue, or a mistake into a wise decision. Error and evil in no way help to construct the human person. They always indicate that we have stumbled, and even failed in a way. Children learning to walk trip and fall all the time; no one is surprised by that. But it would be a mistake to think that the more they trip and fall, the better and sooner they learn to walk. It is natural for them to stumble as they learn, but stumbling does not constitute the art of walking, or represent any kind of progress. When we say that we learn by making mistakes, the idea is that we should be aware ahead of time of the risk of error or failure, but not that the error or failure offers us any benefit. We might extract benefit by reflecting on the error or on ourselves, and drawing appropriate conclusions. For example, people might feel that their failures spur them on to try again, to be more humble, to be more realistic, to understand others better. But none of that is the fruit of the mistake made; it all comes from a subsequent positive attitude taken in response to the failure. The good comes from reflecting constructively on the error made, not from the error itself.

If failure brought people good things, then it would make sense to set failure as a goal in life. But failure should never be a goal, since it cannot really be a positive thing for people. Error, failure and sin are not necessary in life, nor do they make people truly human. What they do is diminish people in different ways, destroy them and hold them back. Error, failure and sin make people less human; they go entirely against progress, and in no way can be

construed as a requirement for progress to take place. They are in fact the opposite of progress.

A long time ago I taught calculus. Once I was trying to solve a problem involving maximums and minimums in front of a class. After filling the board several times, I realized that my result was wrong. We all went over the process together and it looked right to us, but the final answer was patently wrong. The following day, a student pointed out to me that I had multiplied  $5 \times 1 = 6$ ; in other words, I had made a mistake in elementary arithmetic. I assumed I had forgotten some important step or left out a number; it never occurred to me that I had multiplied incorrectly. It was not the mistake, but the realization of it that got us all back on track. The mistake was a setback, and in a certain sense it left us in a worse spot than where we started. A person who thinks that 2 plus 2 is 5, and is satisfied with that error, is worse off than someone who does not know how to add. Adding means adding correctly, just as choosing means choosing what is right.

Thinking that evil, sin or error make people more human is like saying that the sicker people can get, the healthier they are. Health is the opposite of sickness, just as error is the opposite of fulfillment.

The more human people are, the more spontaneously they opt for good, truth and virtue.

People find happiness not in the exercise of freedom, but in accepting a freely chosen and loved duty.

Freedom by itself, with no consideration of good, of the use that is made of it, of the nobility of the heart or of cruelty, is not the supreme value. Freedom, understood as the possibility of doing what one pleases, is an empty concept. It is the enabling condition for licentiousness. The meaning of freedom depends on its object, i.e., on what the person decides.

There is no more freedom than that which God has given to people- a relationship with the living and holy God. So freedom is a relationship, a vocation and a destiny to commit oneself freely to this God in lived holiness. There is no freedom without holiness, without justice and without love. Freedom is a function of holi-

ness, justice and love. We have been given freedom in order to love, to be just and to act in the right way. All of these attributes form a reality that we could call the value of the human person.

Ex. 3:12ff

## Education and Risk

Becoming a human person involves huge risks. People themselves are at stake, along with the environment where they develop and the help they receive from others and from God. Holy Scripture is the history of a task that God has set himself: that of educating people. Both the people of Israel and people in general become aware of their identity in their encounter with God, when they are called by their name and realize that they belong to him, and when they feel that they are the object of God's love. People are solitude, security and confidence, which is how they know, or experience, that they are someone in the presence of Someone.

Is. 43:1ff  
Ex. 33:16

Education is a painful process of growth toward the identification of the self as a person. People are called by their name, above all to be a human being, to become a person and to know themselves.

No matter how painful the process of education is, being human means being happy, which is not the same as having a permanent smile on your face, but rather living in a healthy relationship with others, accepting what is human and inhuman in each person. It is important to educate in responsibility, and to have the courage needed to make decisions, to be right and to make mistakes.

Ex. 33:14ff  
Is. 7:14

Education and the care God takes to educate people, are intended more than anything else to acquaint people with their vocation to be human. God at no time suggests to the nation of Israel that he will steer them clear of the risks of being a nation, or to people that he will keep them away from the risks of being human. He is not there to keep us from risks, but to accompany us as we take them on. The truth is that God calls us to risk and adventure. People's greatness is not made manifest when they run away from difficulties, or when they seek security, or when they avoid danger, but when they accept risks with faith in God's promise. *I myself will go with you* is God's promise to Moses and his people. *Emmanuel* (God with us) and God in favor of people is the God who is faithful in times of crisis and danger. The covenant with God is not about eliminating risk, but about making a commitment to him and facing challenges with intelligence.

The element of crisis, risk and danger reveals the divine element in life. God himself is a risk for people, and people are God's risk. The most fundamental call is to be fully human; risk is a necessary condition of human life.

Ps. 46;  
Jr. 10:2;  
Ex. 3:6  
Dt. 5:24;  
Ps. 23:4

Fear and anxiety are human emotions and a way of relating with others, with the world and with God. When people's attitude toward life is fear, God's response to those people is to give them courage and security. When God reveals himself to people, he uses a typical formula: *Do not fear*. And this is the expression that God repeated to the patriarchs, the prophets and the people.

*Do not fear* is the expression God uses to assure people and give them courage in his presence. Yahweh is the God who assures, respects and confirms people. He is a God in favor of people, not against people.

Ex. 18:21;  
20:20

Fear of God is justified in Scripture as an expression of love of God, or also, as a way of fortifying people's flagging will to fulfill their obligations.

God likes people not to be afraid of other gods, or things, or other nations, because in that way they demonstrate their confidence in the God of Israel. There is no reason to fear other gods, because they do not exist; or other nations, things, people or powers, because God is greater than all of them.

Is. 8:12

Jesus also showed himself to be powerful, and in favor of his disciples, and of people in general. *Do not fear* is a Gospel imperative that Jesus uses to invite his disciples to place their trust in him. What people need in times of risk is not to fear, and to put their trust in something or someone who will make them stronger in the moment of crisis.

Cf. Lk. 5:26;  
7:16;

Mt. 28:5-10

Paul affirms: *The spirit you received is not the spirit of slaves bringing fear into your lives again; it is the spirit of sons, and it makes us cry out, "Abba, Father!"* In Saint John's view, God's love drives out fear, and the fearful are not perfect in their love. *Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God still, and trust in me.*

Rm. 8:15

1 Jn. 4:18

Jn. 14:1

We are not referring here to fear and confidence as just two more values in the wide range of values found in human existence, but as fundamental attitudes



toward life that characterize people in the long, risky process of their development that takes place through their encounter with the outside world.

Education takes place within a personal relationship. People develop under the influence of a human community. They are the subject- not the object- of education because originally they are unfinished, and because they are not isolated in their personal fulfillment.

In this way, the question of education is understood much more in terms of relationship than in terms of content.

Education focuses on the good of the people being educated, and on helping them be more and more human. From this perspective, it cannot be considered licit to educate some and abandon others. Education means accepting people, not excluding them.

The purpose of education is to help others reach their fulfillment. It seeks to favor the development of what already exists as potential in people, to restore what is disfigured, to enable people to take their place in the world. Education is about trying to help, not dominating; guiding, not seducing. Education is a process.

In many ways, people are pre-formed, which is why the concept of education as formation has its limits. There is something in people that belongs to them alone, that makes them unique, and that cannot be reduced to a common denominator.

Education is a process by which educators, through their particular way of being, influence other people, not in the sense of making something of them, but rather of using their own individuality to seek out and awaken the uniqueness of others as human persons.

Human beings are especially susceptible to influence, to being domesticated and educated; they can adapt to almost any lifestyle. But they also have certain innate principles that they can never give up, such as the need for freedom, equality, justice, personal identity. They cannot be so malleable that they lose their own uniqueness.

The purpose of education is to communicate certain values in such a way that people hold them as their own. An education that does not manage to instill inner principles does not fulfill its purpose. This objective cannot be achieved through imposition; it must be attained through a presentation that includes love of the person and of the values. Education does not impose truths; it presents values through the testimony of the person who educates.

The ideal education, at its highest level, would not be about just giving and receiving things; it would set out to discover things together and share them. *There is more happiness in giving than in receiving*, and there is even more in sharing. Deep down, education is not about transmitting knowledge, values or principles; it is more about people giving of themselves and their way of being human.

An important part of people's giving of themselves is no doubt the transmission of knowledge and values,

Ac. 20:35

of culture and virtue, of training and techniques, as well as a vision of the world, of human beings, of society and of God. In this giving and receiving, in this gift of person, in which one communicates to the other his most authentic reality, the sharing is experienced as a gift from God through the other person. And inasmuch as this sharing is done in a spirit of love, the people involved are also willing to forgive and to suffer.

The gift of person that takes place in education does not gloss over, or ignore, or tolerate deficiencies in the people being educated. These deficiencies must be pointed out, and those who are learning, limited as they are, must be strengthened with the force of love.

For the Hebrew people, education is a task of great importance that implies a serious responsibility. This responsibility falls directly on the parents; its basis is respect for authority, and its main purpose is to instill the fear of God.

Dt. 6:4-9

*I too was once a son with a father,  
in my mother's eyes a tender child, unique.  
This was what he used to teach me,  
"Let your heart treasure what I have to say,  
keep my principles and you shall live...  
Listen, my son, take my words to heart,  
and the years of your life shall be multiplied.  
I have educated you in the ways of wisdom,  
I have guided you along the path of honesty.  
As you walk, your going will be unhindered,  
as you run, you will not stumble.  
Hold fast to discipline, never let her go,  
keep your eyes on her, she is your life.* (Pr. 4:3-13)

Concerning the way to educate, Scripture has this to say:

*A man who loves his son will beat him frequently  
so that in after years the son may be his comfort.  
A man who is strict with his son will reap the benefit,  
and be able to boast of him to his acquaintances...*

*A man who coddles his son will bandage his wounds,  
his heart will turn over at every shout.  
A horse badly broken-in turns out stubborn,  
an uncontrolled son turns out headstrong.  
Pamper your child, and he will give you a fright,  
play with him, and he will give you sorrow.  
Do not share his laughter, if you do not wish to share  
his sorrow  
and to end by grinding your teeth.  
Allow him no independence in childhood,  
and do not wink at his mistakes.  
Bend his neck in youth,  
bruise his ribs while he is a child,  
or else he will grow stubborn and disobedient,  
and hurt you very deeply.  
Be strict with your son, and persevere with him,  
or you will rue his insolence. (Si. 30:1-2,7-13)*

These educational methods are clearly primitive, and conditioned by many influences. Educating in respect, awareness, freedom and responsibility implies a risk, but it is a more effective method and in my opinion, the only one that genuinely shows people the way to be human.

Nowadays, education that motivates through love of good and truth works better than education based

on fear of evil and error. Our passion for good and truth must be perceptibly stronger than our compassion for evil and error. We should look for the way to make good, truth and responsibility attractive to the heart. The ideal is for people to feel affectively committed to what they do, and not to act merely out of obedience, but rather out of conviction, and because they have experienced the satisfaction of doing the right thing. When this right thing appears as a fruit, it bears within it many seeds, in the sense that people feel the need to do it over and over the same way.

Christian life requires the participation and integration of the whole person, especially her feelings, in doing good. Although it is sometimes necessary to deny oneself in order to do good, the ultimate goal *is not self-denial*, but rather just the opposite, self-affirmation. When people love others by denying themselves, that love goes bad. Love must be given willingly and happily.

Feelings should not undermine good actions; they should reaffirm people's motivation. The integrity of the person requires integrity of action. It is important to look for harmony between a healthy way of thinking and an honest way of acting, between intellectual motivation based on principle and joy in action. The ideal is for good to spring from the heart and not just from reason. The education of the heart should be an answer to the unexpected problems that come up in life.

A person's heart is revealed when it reaches out beyond the self, when it overcomes personal interest and selfishness by opening itself to others with love

and reverence. The heart shows itself the capacity to find and to form value in others. The heart expresses itself in the capacity to love.

A value with no life commitment is a half-hearted value. Genuine education tries to create bonds between people. Transmitting values without creating bonds is like giving a child a balloon filled with helium, and not tying it to her finger.

## **Adolescence**

We will define adolescence as the period that goes from puberty, when secondary sexual characteristics appear, to the young adult stage, when physical growth stops.

First we will look at people's development as physical beings, their corporality, their sexuality and their functions. This inner growth, along with other aspects and circumstances of adolescence, provokes a crisis in teenagers. When an adolescent encounters himself, he cannot help but encounter his own sexuality, and when he encounters others, he encounters their sexuality. These encounters can be disconcerting and provoke a personal crisis. Adolescents encounter, and experience, the unknown.

It is understandable that adolescents in their ignorance, their inexperience, their curiosity and their immaturity in different areas of life, make a few mistakes. Recognizing them, accepting them and integrating them into a complete vision of life is an

important and indispensable sign of human maturity. It is normal for people to have certain positive and negative experiences, but they should not suffer undue anguish over them, no matter how painful they may have been. What is not normal, although it is unfortunately common, is that people never manage to come to terms with their past and integrate it into their life with equanimity.

The support of a prudent counselor, the examples and advice of parents, and the company of good friends tend to be a great help during adolescence.

We can assume that given the conditions of adolescence the lack of sufficient knowledge, of full-fledged freedom, of human integration and maturity many of the negative sexual experiences that adolescents have are not serious faults. An intense and liberating spiritual life will help them to integrate their personality better and in less time.

It is normal for adolescents at some point to feel uneasy and question the integrity of their masculinity or femininity, especially when they discover their own sexuality at the same time as they discover that of their friends of the same sex.

The process of a person's growth should not be regarded as a series of isolated acts, but as a general life orientation and a goal that is reached gradually. But we must not ignore the fact that isolated acts that are repeated can gradually determine the direction of a person's life.

Becoming an adult is a painful process of growth. Individuals experience it as an explosion, and also as incoherence. An explosion often occurs in everything people are and want to be, in their way of acting and of relating with others. For many, adolescence is the time when certain heroes begin to fall from their pedestals, while others just switch places. It is a time when everything shifts, even ideals.

People need to begin to accept themselves as they are, and not in a passive or conformist sense. On the contrary, personal fortitude is needed to look reality and truth in the face and make a commitment to a struggle in which happiness is at stake. Being human is not an easy task; it means carrying around a bit of heaven and a bit of hell inside.

People find God in their struggle, which oftentimes is a struggle with themselves. A child's encounter with God is not usually the one that leaves a mark on the adult. Generally speaking, the encounter with God that is most decisive occurs during adolescence, perhaps because it is when people discover themselves, or else during early adulthood, when people have their decisive encounter with others.

Cf. Gn.  
32:25ff

In this stage of life, friends play a very important role. Adolescents begin to sense that they can take care of themselves to a certain extent without depending on others, but they also understand that they are not yet completely self-sufficient. This is when friends become important, offering enrichment, entertainment, stimulation. Relationships based on friendship are primordial, and adolescents tend to feel more comfortable with others of their same sex. These



friendships tend not to be especially deep; they start out as a way to have someone to "hang out" with, often involving members of a gang or a team.

Adolescents begin to find out that true friends are not bought, but made. Finding friends is a very important aspect of people's lives, and a good friend is one in a hundred.

*Let your acquaintances be many, but your advisers  
one in a thousand.*

*If you want to make a friend, take him on trial, and  
be in no hurry to trust him;*

*for one kind of friend is only so when it suits him but  
will not stand by you in your day of trouble.*

*Another kind of friend will fall out with you and to  
your dismay make your quarrel public,  
and a third kind of friend will share your table, but not  
stand by you in your day of trouble:*

*when you are doing well he will be your second self,  
ordering your servants about;  
but if ever you are brought low, he will turn against you  
and will hide himself from you.*

*Keep well clear of your enemies,  
and be wary of your friends.*

*A faithful friend is a sure shelter,  
whoever finds one has found a rare treasure.*

*A faithful friend is beyond price,  
there is no measuring his worth.*

*A faithful friend is the elixir of life,  
and those who fear the Lord will find one.*

*Whoever fears the Lord makes true friends,  
for as a man is, so is his friend.* (Si. 6:6-17)

Friendship takes root where there a genuine communication of values. Friendship is about creating bonds. Friendship is like illuminating one's own life with the light of another person.

Cf. Saint Exupéry,  
The Little Prince,  
Chap. XXI

Friendship is a modest, simple and strong form of people's capacity to love. People are never in greater possession of themselves than when they give themselves out of love; when they forget about themselves, their fulfillment is even greater. When people give of themselves in a genuine way, there is no hidden interest, no selfishness, no deceit. Those who give of themselves want nothing back; the satisfaction and fulfillment that come from this giving, are enough for them.

1 Co. 13:1-13

Friendship is a powerful link between two people who are worthy of each other. It is a reciprocal relationship that tends toward the good.

When friends do the wrong thing, they are not really friends; they remain linked to their actions. And they often reject and hate each other to the extent they want to surpass each other. This explains the following expression: if you want to be a better person, make good friends; if you want to help others, be a good friend.

People make many friends over their lifetime; *and there are friends who lead one to ruin, while others are closer than a brother. Many describe themselves as friends, but who can find a man really to be trusted?*

Pr. 20:6

When two people have spent time together, when they have run risks together, looked for freedom,

Pr. 26:20

struggled for life, when they make sacrifices for the sake of truth, liberation and humanity, and also when they play on the same team, strong bonds are created.

People need many friends. Without their friends' collaboration and support, without their corroboration of values, people simply could not stay the course. Friendship is an ongoing exchange. If the exchange is interrupted, the ties are broken. *No wood, and the fire goes out.* If a person asks a friend for something, it is to strengthen the bond that joins them. Friendship for the purpose of exploiting the other, is not friendship at all.

Cicero believed that friendship was a rare thing, and that friends should be few. But that is not the case for Christians. Christians should learn to project their faith, hope and love onto Jesus who is present in others, especially those who they have chosen to be closest to.

It is not unusual for a friend to turn away and disappoint those who believed in him, and even to do them harm. But the feelings of friendship should also encompass the capacity to forgive, and to restore a broken heart. Sometimes people have to wait for their friend to reconsider and come back. Other times they have to go seek her out.

But friends also die, and in a certain sense, those left behind die with them. There are times when it takes all the strength people can muster just to say good-bye. Over the course of their lives, people often have to learn how to be alone; this is not unusual. People need to learn that all friendships are relative,

that a more important relationship exists that grows out of the relationship with others....

In Scripture, friendship is an important value. One of the fundamental truths that the Bible asserts is that God is a friend to people, and that people can do no better than to strive to be a close friend of God.

The experience of human friendship precedes the experience of friendship with God. One cannot become a friend of God without the previous experience of having, or being, a friend.

Of the friendship between David and Jonathan, Scripture says:

*Jonathan made a pact with David  
to love him as his own soul.* (1 S. 18:3)

When Jonathan dies, David intones this lament:

*How did the heroes fall in the thick of the battle?  
Oh Jonathan! In your death I am stricken,  
I am desolate for you, Jonathan my brother.  
Very dear to me you were,  
your love to me more wonderful  
than the love of a woman.* (2 S. 1:25-26)

Clothing is a sign of the person. Jonathan, by exchanging his clothes, expresses his interpersonal communication with David.

*He took off the cloak he was wearing  
and gave it to David,*

*and his armor too, even his sword,  
his bow and his belt.* (1 S. 18:4)

Childhood friends, like wine, grow more exquisite with age. These friendships are not built or improvised; a newly-planted seed cannot cast the shadow of a full-grown oak. Good friends always demonstrate that they value your friendship, because what counts most between two people is the relationship.

*Fragrant oil gladdens the heart,  
friendship's sweetness comforts the soul.  
Do not abandon friend, or father's friend;  
when trouble comes, do not go running to your  
brother's house.  
Better a friend near than a brother far away.*  
(Pr. 27:9-10)

*Throw stones at birds and you scare them away,  
revile a friend and you break up a friendship.* (Si. 22:20)

Jesus also understands the relationship he has with his disciples as a friendship; he shares with them his most personal, painful and important experiences.

*A man can have no greater love  
than to lay down his life for his friends.  
You are my friends,  
if you do what I command you.  
I shall not call you servants any more,  
because a servant does not know his master's business;  
I call you friends,  
because I have made known to you  
everything I have learned from my father.*

*What I command you  
is to love one another.*

(Jn. 15:13-15, 17)

## Young Adulthood

Shakespeare wrote the famous soliloquy: *To be or not to be: that is the question.*

Shakespeare,  
Hamlet

But the question is not really about being or not being. It is a much more prosaic dialogue. The question is about presence and awareness: being present for someone and in the presence of someone. The question is about relationship and service, not metaphysical isolation.

The question about human beings in the Bible does not focus on defining what they are, but on valuing them. It is not about distinguishing them from animals or things, but about their relationship with God. It has to do with their duty, their task, their obligation, their vocation. Moses never would have asked this question had he not felt the urgency of liberation. *Who am I to go to Pharaoh and bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?*

Ex. 3:11

Jeremiah says in response to the task God gives him: *Ah, Lord Yahweh; look, I do not know how to speak: I am a child!* The question arises in anguish when a person is asked to give the impossible. What a person is, becomes identified with that person's task and vocation; the fulfillment of the duty merges with the fulfillment of the person.

Jr. 1:6

Everyone is necessary for someone and for something; people who are not necessary for someone or something, are nobody. Even in terms of human fulfillment, people feel good about themselves when they know they are useful and when someone is waiting for them. The fact that people are always necessary for someone means that their life is never useless. There is always Someone waiting for them as a person, expecting something from them.

Ex. 3:12-14

Moses' question Who am I to go to Pharaoh, etc.? is that of all people: Who am I? People are a task to perform, and a response patiently expected. The answer to the question about who people are comes from God. "*I shall be with you,*" was the answer, "*and this is the sign by which you shall know that it is I who have sent you.*" The answer is God's presence and company in life. It would seem that each person is unique and God is alone, ever waiting for a response.

Ex. 3:12ff

This gives people a glimpse of a new history and the promise of being able to become much more than they now are.

The task is huge: human misery is so overwhelming that it can only be confronted from a divine perspective. People's needs are so numerous that an individual human being simply cannot meet them. In addition, failure and hard work affirm virtues, and courage is needed to move forward from the pain and misery of others.

Young people, no matter how settled they are, always have something of the nomad in them: they are

always looking for something that is beyond their experience, and for someone that they do not know.

One's personal vocation is an inalienable right, the right to live one's own life. It is what people are supposed to do with their life, which is why we regard our entire life as a vocation: a call from God who is always out looking for people, but God is the one who makes the vocation possible. One's vocation is a personal gift with a social function. It is the awareness of my identity before God, and also the demand that I respond to other people's needs.

A person's vocation is always dynamic and creative. And it is not enough to respond once and for all. Each day demands a response. God's call starts an ongoing dialogue with the person's response. What gives meaning to freedom is the right to commit to something and to someone. The initiative and the call come from God; the response comes from the person, but God is the one who makes the response possible.

It is important to pay attention to the means that the Lord uses to make his will known to us, leading us to our most authentic vocation: Scripture, prayer, the ability to look deep within ourselves and listen to our most profound feelings and desires, the signs of the times, and most importantly, the signs of our own history.

We are not given a vocation primarily for our own personal satisfaction, but to serve others. People are nothing without other people. People are a reference to others in service. Being a human person means being concerned about something other than oneself.



When Jesus called the disciples by name and invited them to follow him, he gave some of them a nickname which meant not so much a change of identity as a new function or a new meaning to their life, in service to others.

It is possible to discover the meaning of one's life through a job or a profession. I will make you fishers of men, sowers of the word, or shepherds of a flock. All of these are images that Jesus used to give his followers a new perspective on their life. Work can both uncover and conceal the meaning of a person's life.

Young adults usually make some important decisions, because they have the reins of their life in their hands; they are not yet burdened down by things that hold them back or weigh them down. They are not embittered by hatred or resentment. They have a healthy optimism that leads them to think that things are easier than they really are, and perhaps because at this point they feel that their life belongs to them alone, they find it easy to give it up for others. Young adults have not had enough failures yet to feel defeated; they do not yet realize that their illnesses could prove to be chronic.

Young adults should take advantage of their inexperience to go off boldly and undertake the adventure of their life. The only thing they need to remember is that their goal is to reach out to other people and to God. They may not excuse themselves from the task of knowing the God of Israel, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; that is to say, a God who is always interested in his people and in all people.

Vocation does not mean leaving oneself behind; it means giving oneself over to the Lord in all of one's being and actions; not giving up one's destiny, but recalling it in the task at hand. God is always on the lookout for people, and finds them sooner or later, but it is better for people to be on time than late. God comes to people before they even open the door.

Time is a decisive factor. It is not enough to plant a seed for it to flower; one must wait until springtime. People also have their growing season: God's time, the time of grace.

Being young means having time to build, to plant, to change. It means being light enough to fly. It is a period of freedom.

*When you were young,  
you put on your own belt  
and walked where you liked;  
but when you grow old,  
you will stretch out your hands,  
and somebody else will put a belt around you  
and take you where you would rather not go. (Jn. 21:18)*

Everyone is capable of giving more than others might expect. Sometimes it seems as if life, circumstances or God are asking for more than one can give. In this case, it can be good to pray as Saint Augustine did: *Lord, ask of me what you will, as long as you give me the capacity to give you what you ask.* Many people think that God does not have the right to ask them for more than an ordinary effort, the same, more or less, that he asks of everyone else. But thinking that we are all identical members of a uniform

human nature can lead us to conclude that God does not make particular demands, or invite us down unique paths.

Each person is unique before God, and may receive a unique task to fulfill, or have very particular demands made on her.

The permanence of a commitment to God or to another person does not have to do so much with foreseeing the future as with procuring the means needed to maintain the commitment. The commitment, made in the present, is to keep our word in the future. The future does not belong to us, but to God. And a commitment to the future means a giving of our entire self in the present. It is a way of saying that at the present moment we are so willing to give of everything we are, that we want to provide the means to make our donation perpetual. And that we hope that today's giving prepares the way for an even more complete giving tomorrow.

Faithfulness is the concrete expression of a person's continuity and authenticity. People are unfaithful when they have no sense of their history, when they forget who they are, or do not take themselves seriously and betray themselves. People should be faithful to their word only insofar as that word expresses what those people are and establishes a personal relationship. Faithfulness is based on the person, not on a ritual, or the circumstances, or history, which is always changing. Rituals are important because they consecrate and make people aware of the transcendence of their decisions.

Aristotle said that he considered himself faithful to his friendship with Plato, but that he valued his faithfulness to the truth even more. *I am a friend to Plato, but more of a friend to truth.* With this he justified his discrepancy with several points of his teacher's doctrine. Perhaps it was not so much faithfulness to an abstract truth as faithfulness to himself, and perhaps, even more so, faithfulness to a transcendent personal being who can be reached through faithfulness to truth, which is his ultimate foundation. When people seek the truth and are faithful to it, they are faithful to God himself.

Since we are all plagued by errors, we should not set up divisions based on errors found in others. It is dismal and practically useless to be right and all alone.

A commitment to truth should lead us to a commitment to people. Precisely because we seek out the truth, we should seek out other people. It would be useless to humanity for a person to discover the truth and then die or hide.

*The first demand of truth is to avoid self-deceit.  
Since you love sincerity of heart,  
teach me the secrets of wisdom.* (Ps. 51:6)

God wants there to be truth in our heart and wisdom in our life, and faithfulness to God implies faithfulness to truth. You shall not lie, is one of God's imperatives to people, and it shows that people, truth and God are linked. When people are faithful to truth, they not only fulfill themselves in terms of authenticity, they also touch God, who is the foundation of truth. And we are not referring only to metaphysical or mathematical

truth, but to the truth of history, of events, of situations. So whoever runs from reality or truth runs from himself and from God.

*Fight to the death for truth,  
and the Lord God will war on your side.* (Si. 4:28)

## Human Maturity

The term maturity is rather vague and imprecise. Nevertheless, here we will use it to refer to adults who make optimal use of their faculties. It will be more of a goal than a description of real people, who in more than four ways tend to be immature. All of life can be seen as a single process of maturing.

In life people inevitably run up against conflicts when forming their conscience: general law and particular situations; the weight of public opinion and the immediate judgment of their conscience; the common good and the personal good; the letter of the law, or dead law, and the spirit of the law, or living law. Are people important for what they are or for what they do? Should they value themselves, and be valued, for what they are or for what they do; for their personal deficiencies or for what they fail to do?

It is clear that being takes priority over acting (first being, then acting), but this is just the logical or intellectual order. Because being has been given to us, while acting is what is asked of us. Acting is what manifests and fulfills being. Being, existing, living and

acting are not contradictory terms; they are incomplete terms that require each other.

It is important to tune the heart not just to the letter of the law, but to the objective that is being pursued. The ideal is to live beyond the immediate demands of the law.

Those who give their lives have the right to give the law as well, because the law is what life demands. Life brings with it law, a series of definitive conditions that must be met in order for life to emerge or last. We have been given law not just to obey it, but to love it.

The law was given so that people could fulfill themselves, and compliance only makes sense if it arises out of love. The law is a kind of revelation that refers to practice, but it is only a teacher, an educator. The purpose of the law is to become an inner principle of action, and then to disappear. We have been given the law, especially in the New Testament, so that we might surpass it. Jesus' law is also capable of becoming dead letter; it can enslave and give rise to Pharisees. Jesus' law is about freeing people.

There are few things that Jesus insisted on more than inner freedom; of few things did he give so many examples, and few things brought him such dire consequences. It does not appear likely that Jesus tried to create any kind of special spirituality around poverty or penitence. He was severely criticized for associating with publicans and sinners. What he taught and lived was a special devotion to inner freedom and trust in God, like the trust that children have in their parents.

Ps. 119

Ga. 3:24 ff.

The freedom of God's children touches on the religious meaning of people's lives. Jesus was never a scrupulous person. He felt repugnance for people who abided punctiliously by the law. Jesus taught that trust should be placed in God, not in the security of having obeyed the law.

The observance of the law has merit only when it is done with love. Even in the Old Testament, the law is not truly observed unless it is observed with the heart; the idea is to strive toward the fullest possible love, and not settle for mere observance. The greatest of the commandments is love; and love is shown in obeying the commandments.

In the Old Testament, the solution to the problems that come up in life is the law; in the New Testament, the solution to the problem of the law is love. Moses gave us the law, and Jesus gives us love in order to fulfill it. Moses, the law of God, is a criterion for interpreting and leading one's life. Jesus is a living principle; he is the cause and author of life, he consummates it.

Rm. 13:8-10;  
Ga. 5:14

John, when referring to Moses and Jesus in the prologue to his Gospel, makes a comparison: *The Law was given through Moses, grace and truth have come through Jesus Christ*. Moses receives a gift and transmits it. Jesus makes the gift, and helps us to give back in return. Saint Augustine came up with this liberating and profound formula: *love and do what you will*, because love is the only law capable of guiding people without humiliating them. *Love brings about the keeping of the commandments; he who is destitute of love has no true grounds for keeping the commandments*.

Jn. 1:17

St. Augustine,  
On the Gospel  
of John.  
Tr. 82:3

In the Bible, people are fulfilled by obeying, and obedience is something that ennobles people profoundly and links them to God and to the world. Being and obeying are complementary terms that refer to each other. People are most fully what they are when they obey freely and in love.

*To sum up the whole matter:  
fear God and keep his commandments,  
since that is the whole duty of man.* (Qo. 12:13)

Life and the desire to live are two different things, and we do not live because we desire it, but because we were given life. We are meant to live, and by living we obey. Life is a gift, not a desire or an impulse. Our desire to live is a response to God's desire that we live. The desire to live is our acceptance of the life God has given us, and our agreement with him.

It is a sign of maturity and conscious acceptance of one's own life to freely want what one ought to be and to do. We have been given freedom in order to obey freely. Disobedience diminishes people and frustrates them. This happens even on the physical, intellectual and spiritual levels: the supreme law is obedience. People do not invent the laws of nature; they discover them and obey them.

The value of adults is more closely linked to their obligations (their obedience) than to their rights. They are given freedom in order to spontaneously love good, truth and people, and to form bonds with them. Only as free beings can people incline toward good as such, toward truth and other people. Good, truth and the human person always allude to the



freedom of the other. There is no good without freedom to perceive it. Nor is there truth without a person to accept it. Truth, like all information, is something that is received from outside and assimilated inside; it is something that people receive and appropriate. They appropriate it because they come to know it and relate to it. Truth is a real fact taken in by a free being, or better yet: it is the free intake of a real fact.

Freedom and good are relative and reciprocal realities. For people, the task is to stand up as human beings, and they do so only when they orient their possibilities toward what is good.

The law is there to orient human activity by using practical cases to remind people of the concrete ways they should live certain values. However, the more a law goes into detail, the less adaptable it is to personal circumstances. The law is meant to illuminate life, not to suffocate it; nor should it mutilate people's creativity or serve as a pretext or excuse for people to evade their responsibilities. If you only do as you are told, you will always be leaving many things undone.

Maturing with experience means maturing in the way of living one's life. Part of human maturity is reaching a certain level of inner freedom, even as it bears on the law of God. It is to be expected that, with God's help, subordinates can mature to such a degree that they can do without unreasonable superiors. The principle of authority, and authority itself, must be based on reason.

A mother once was watching her child stick things into an electrical socket. She told him two or three times not to do it, because he could get a shock. But the child did not know what a shock was, and did not obey. So the mother took a bobby pin and gave it to him. The child learned from experience what an electrical shock was. He learned that it was necessary to obey, not so much because his mother was an authority as because she was right.

Jesus' attitude, and the testimony found in the Gospels about his life and teaching regarding the law might seem contradictory at first glance, but a deeper reflection reveals the coherence of Jesus' actions and teaching.

Jesus does not admit in the least that the law can become a means of salvation. In his view, and in the prophets', people cannot save themselves without God's exclusive initiative. People's salvation depends not on how closely their life hews to legal prescriptions, but on their acceptance of God's kingdom as manifested in Jesus.

Faith in Jesus and following him are the basis of salvation, not obedience to the law. The publicans and the prostitutes will enter before the Pharisees. We can draw the same conclusion from the parables of the lost sheep, the lost drachma and the prodigal son.

Mt. 11:7-15;  
Lk. 16:16;  
Mk. 2:21  
Mt. 21:31-32;  
Lk. 15:1ff;  
Mt. 10:32-33;  
Mk. 10:13-16

*If your virtue goes no deeper  
than that of the scribes and Pharisees,  
you will never get into the kingdom of heaven.*

(Mt. 5:20)

Conversion is not about fulfilling the letter of the law, but about giving one's heart, about freedom and justice.

In the New Testament, the law describes the behavior that people can and should observe once they have accepted on faith that God has set up a new alliance with them. Jesus fulfills the law and reveals its absolute demands. Jesus' violent opposition is not to the law itself, but to the spurious uses people make of it, and to the false power of salvation attributed to it.

In Jesus' time, the law of Moses regarding the Sabbath was in full force, and considered the law of God.

Obeying the commandments is dangerously deceiving when people hide behind it to avoid repentance and to delay committing themselves unconditionally to Christ in their neighbors. Family or job responsibilities can be illusory if they serve as an excuse for not following Jesus. The Sabbath-day rest is worth nothing if it goes against immediate love of neighbor. And compliance with the commandments is false if people think they are exempt from repentance.

Saint Paul develops the same line of thought as Jesus, except that his reflections, conclusions and applications may sometimes seem more drastic. In Paul's view, for example, becoming a believer is not a change of behavior; it is self-abandonment in order to be in Christ. Obedience of the law is not the condition of salvation, but a free and living consequence.

The purpose of the law is not just the common good or personal good. It also leads to another result, equal-

Mt. 5:17  
Mt. 5: 21-48

Mt. 8:21-22;  
Lk. 24:25-27;  
Mk. 3:1-6;  
Lk. 18:9-14  
Col. 3:1-2;  
Ph. 3:9

Cf. Ga. and Rm.

ly transcendent, which is a personal encounter with Christ and a living relationship with him.

Jn 13:34; 15:10  
Rm. 10:4; Ga 3:24

People who lack self-confidence, or who are not especially gifted intellectually, often take refuge in the observance of the law as a way to bolster their confidence. They shirk their responsibility, and attribute the success or failure of their act to legislators or the law itself. People who know no better than to observe the law are destined to be bound by it.

It can be said in general, and particularly in Jesus' case, that the best interpretation of the law, or at least the one that he made, was never a literal interpretation. Even when the law in question is God's law- the commandments and the legislation found in Exodus and Deuteronomy- the observance that God calls for is above all, an observance of the heart. The law in and of itself, including God's law, needs to be interpreted. Jurisprudence is demanded by the law itself. Thus the best way to obey, most of the time, is not obedience to the letter of the law, just as the best interpretation of the law is not literal.

Abraham Joshua Herschel, a great contemporary rabbi, says: *God's law is written without vowels (in Hebrew), vowels are the soul of words. God's law is made of consonants; each individual is called to fill in the vowels. What we need is a way to hear the vowels when reading the consonants.*

One of the greatest human values consists not of monopolizing all values, but of recognizing one's deficiencies. The smug, the proud, the egocentric have a long way to go to be fully human. And those who lord

their authority over others, either despotically or paternalistically, go against the common good. They are bad for society, and of course for their subordinates as well. An outstanding quality in people of authority has always been the capacity to listen to advice.

A legislator that is concerned with people's maturity and with the real objective of the law, does not worry about being recognized and obeyed as a legislator. A totalitarian and paternalistic legislator would prefer that his subordinates refrain from thinking and making decisions, and simply do as they are told. But that would be a legislator who takes pleasure in the destruction, or at least in the non-development of the human person. This happens frequently among people, but we must not project it onto God. Jesus was not in favor of people who chose to fulfill their duty as a way to avoid risk, or to obtain security. Tradition, understood not as the loving transmission of cherished values but rather as dead custom, was something that Jesus could not stomach because it gave people false, invalid criteria; because it deprived them of the need to think and create; and because it took people out of the context of their history and circumstances.

Custom is no reason for acting the same way as ever, if it is not a good way to act.

*The Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, and they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with unclean hands, that is, without washing them. They asked him, "Why do your disciples not respect the*

Mt. 25:14  
Lk 19:12

*tradition of the elders but eat their food with unclean hands?"*

*He answered,*

*"It was of you hypocrites that Isaiah so rightly prophesied in this passage of scripture:*

*'This people honors me only with lip-service, while their hearts are far from me.*

*The worship they offer me is worthless, the doctrines they teach are only human regulations.' You put aside the commandment of God to cling to human traditions."*

*And he said to them,*

*"How ingeniously you get around the commandment of God in order to preserve your own tradition!"*

(Mk. 7:1-9)

The following aphorism about personal responsibility also applies to moral values and to our relationship with God: Those who do no more than what they are paid for, deserve pay for no more than what they do. The law is a road sign, or a route; it is a starting point, a piece of information, a fact, but not a goal.

Adults usually have a rather high index of childishness. Many parents, teachers and priests foment this; in fact, they often present it as authentic Christian morality. For example, there are people who try to take out insurance against divine accountability by confessing faults they cannot remember. In this case, what counts is authentic contrition, not an escape clause to clean up the past. Semi-superstitions and devotional routines take priority over the demands of loving God and neighbor. Yahweh does not like people to use rituals to purchase peace of mind.

Adults should establish a hierarchy of values, not keep track of isolated faults. God is not an accountant; God is a Father and a Mother characterized by an immense capacity to comprehend. The integrity of a confession, for example, depends on the integrity of the person, not on the exact number of her transgressions.

The God who urges people to strive for freedom in their actions, also demands that they educate themselves in the pedagogy of the law, interpret it and take it to heart, but finally surpass it and leave it behind.

## **Complementarity**

Gn. 2:19-25

People cannot become human without the help of other people. Even in their encounters with others, they are limited and social. Their nature, expressed in the Bible with the concept of origin, is dialogical. People are creatures capable of speech, of having a dialogue with God, but for this, they must first establish dialogue with others.

When they are young adults, people often feel self-sufficient, with no need to communicate, but as they come face-to-face with their own reality, they must confront their own indigence, their need to love and be loved, to answer and ask, to give and receive. As they mature, they not only take responsibility for the course of their own life, they also try to share their responsibility.

People need to share their life with someone, not just pass the time with them. In Scripture, this need is

grounded primarily in God's will; it is thus a need rooted in nature.

Gn. 2:18-20

In Genesis, the woman is a gift from God for the man, who cannot help but shout for joy from his heart: *This at last is bone from my bones, and flesh from my flesh! This expresses a kind of identification. This is to be called woman, for this was taken from man. This is why a man leaves his father and mother and joins himself to his wife, and they become one body.*

Gn. 2:23-24

People set out to look for someone who could become their spouse, and when they meet, and look at each other face to face, they imagine the possibilities that are concealed in the other person, and they fall in love, that is, they feel moved to realize these possibilities.

Tb. 8:5-7

The Song of Songs says:

*On my bed, at night,  
I sought him whom my heart loves.  
I sought but did not find him.  
So I will rise and go through the City;  
in the streets and the squares  
I will seek him whom my heart loves.  
...I sought him but did not find him.  
The watchmen came upon me  
on their rounds in the City:  
"Have you seen him whom my heart loves?"  
Scarcely had I passed them  
than I found him whom my heart loves.  
I held him fast, nor would I let him go,  
till I had brought him into my mother's house,  
into the room of her who conceived me.* (Sg. 3:1-4)



Courtship is a wonderful adventure, not exempt of risks, of ups and downs, of light and dark moments. And it serves a series of purposes, which could be listed as follows:

✧ Establishing mutual liking, attraction and agreement. Perhaps from the first encounter, the couple feels the possibility of falling in love, or they feel infatuated. The Book of Ecclesiasticus says:

*A woman's beauty delights the beholder,  
a man likes nothing better.  
If her tongue is kind and gentle,  
her husband has no equal among the sons of men.  
The man who takes a wife has the makings of a fortune,  
a helper that suits him and a pillar to lean on.  
If a property has no fence, it will be plundered.  
When a man has no wife, he is aimless and querulous.*  
(Si 36:22-25)

✧ The development of a reciprocal understanding, the fruit of a sincere friendship. They start to experience the joy of forming a good couple and of finding company for life.

*Happy the man who keeps house with a sensible wife,  
he who does not toil with ox and donkey.* (Si. 25:8)

This proverb refers to the need to form a good couple, in order to tackle the chores inherent in life.

*Cattle and vineyards make you well known,  
better valued than either, a perfect wife.* (Si. 40:19)

✧ Respectful and affectionate sensitivity to the other person's physical presence.

*"If you want a friend, tame me..." said the fox.  
 "What must I do, to tame you?" asked the little prince.  
 "You must be very patient," replied the fox. "First you  
 will sit down at a little distance from me, like that, in  
 the grass. I shall look at you out of the corner of my  
 eye, and you will say nothing. Words are the source of  
 misunderstandings. But you will sit a little closer to  
 me, every day..."*

Saint Exupéry,  
 The Little Prince,  
 Chap. XXI

✧ Sensitivity to the other person's mood. It is important to learn to share feelings from the start. A kiss can be an act of respect; it can also be a way of translating love into inner music. It can also serve to deceive.

✧ Appreciation and support for the other person's spiritual values. Being a couple means sharing the responsibility for the heart and the soul.

✧ Enjoyment in sharing life's happy and sad moments, as well as especially significant moments. Enjoyment also in sharing values and looking for validation, that is, confirmation of one's own values by sharing them and living them together.

✧ The most appropriate attitude at this stage is sincerity and authenticity. Lying here would mean deceiving and being deceived about the truth and happiness of both one and the other.

In this sense, courtship is a preliminary stage of preparation for sharing a life together. It is a time for testing each person's structures, principles and values,

and not just isolated feelings. The couple should try to see if these are strong enough to promise a hope that will sustain their lives forever.

In courtship, first, and in marriage later, the 'thou' of the encounter becomes a lifetime issue. It includes the other person's spiritual, psychological and physical existence in the building of an unbreakable bond. Courtship revolves essentially around dialogue, exclusivity and reciprocal formation. It leads up to a decision, but courtship itself is not a decision. It is for finding out if the two people are meant for each other.

The commitment involved in courtship consists of getting to know each other enough to be able to choose freely. As of this moment, the couple begins to have certain things in common- the way they see themselves and each other and the way they assess reality. This communion should come to include all areas of life. Under ordinary circumstances, unmarried and married couples are their own best supporters and counselors for personal growth; we might also say they are the best psychotherapists. They have a level of understanding and knowledge that is the fruit of love, not of study.

What makes people happy, in the final analysis, is love. And love is not a commodity to be bought and sold; it must be cultivated like a rare plant. It is born, it grows, it develops, it gives fruit, and when it is not allowed to wither and not cut down, it becomes eternal.

People are born of love. They develop surrounded by love. They live to love. They are called to be in love

their whole life long. And they are responsible forever for the object of their love, that is, for the person they have chosen, for the way they love him or her, and for living perpetually in love.

Being in love forever does not refer so much to a feeling as to a way of being and acting. There are couples that even after their golden wedding anniversary can still sit down on a park bench and keep each other company in silence. In this case, the silence says what fifty years ago the couple would have expressed more ardently and with endless dialogue.

Love brings with it the capacity to get through difficult times; sometimes it even causes suffering that puts the soul to the test. *One runs the risk of weeping a little, if one dares to love.* Love, happiness and suffering form the alloy of a precious metal that can be found in life.

Saint Exupéry,  
The Little Prince

Men and women were created together, and though they are gendered beings, they are the image of God, who has no gender, just as with their bodies they are the image of God who is spirit. Together they receive the mission of cultivating and taking care of the earth, and of being fruitful. The woman, created out of the man and for the man, is a helpmate who is also God's image. This was a revolutionary way of expressing the value and dignity of women in that time and culture.

Gn. 1:26-28

Gn. 2:18

Gn. 2:23-24

Women are not inferior to men, they are their other half. As gendered beings, physically and psychologically different, men and women complement and accompany each other. In order to make their life with

a woman, men must leave behind what is closest and dearest to them: their mother and father.

*There are three things beyond my comprehension,  
four, indeed, that I do not understand:  
the way of an eagle through the skies,  
the way of a snake over the rock,  
the way of a ship in mid-ocean,  
the way of a man with a girl.* (Pr. 30:18-19)

A pagan poet, Pindar, wrote:  
*The storm-tossed sea is magnificent,  
the sun in the mountains is lovely,  
the ships arrayed for battle are stirring,  
but what makes all things beautiful is love.*

In the Bible, life springs forth from love. The Book of Proverbs, the oldest of the wisdom literature, says:

*More than all else, keep watch over your heart,  
since here are the wellsprings of life.  
Let your eyes be fixed ahead,  
your gaze be straight before you.  
Let the path you tread be level  
and all your ways made firm.  
Turn neither to right nor to left,  
keep your foot clear of evil.* (Pr. 4:23-27)

*Drink the water from your own cistern,  
fresh water from your own well.  
Do not let your fountains flow to waste elsewhere,  
nor your streams in the public street.  
Let them be for yourself alone,  
not for strangers at the same time.  
And may your fountainhead be blessed!*

*Find joy with the wife you married in your youth,  
fair as a hind, graceful as a fawn.  
Let hers be the company you keep,  
hers the breasts that ever fill you with delight,  
hers the love that ever holds you captive.  
Why be seduced, my son, by an alien woman,  
and fondle the breast of a woman who is a stranger?  
For the eyes of Yahweh observe a man's ways  
and survey all his plans.  
The wicked man is snared in his own misdeeds,  
is caught in the meshes of his own sin.  
For want of discipline, he dies,  
and is lost through his own excessive folly. (Pr. 5:15-23)*

When love follows its own natural development, each step brings something new and different, and a new encounter is like something that has just begun. The task that each person has is to build a love that is unique, creative, never seen before. This is why it is important to look at love from an elevated perspective, as a way of participating in God's love.

The birth of love is like a natural phenomenon. Faithfulness in love is a spiritual event. Having loved is always a supernatural gift, one of those that are usually called 'grace'.

## **Parenthood**

When we speak of parenthood, we are referring to what men and women both go through when they have a child, not to what is specific to masculinity or femininity, or to the biological fact of engendering,

gestating and giving birth, but rather to the fullness people experience when they transmit life.

People attain a high level of fulfillment and humanity not only when they penetrate the world's secrets or dominate the earth, but also when they find themselves, and when they encounter another person in the intimacy of their being, and from this encounter they make a commitment that both of them will be at the service of others, especially of their child. In this way, the child is sure to have the people he needs as his parents.

Gn 5:3

Lk. 3:18

People grow for their own good to the extent that they devote themselves and take care of others. Parenthood forces people to stop focusing on themselves and start worrying about someone else. This someone else is distinct from them, she is 'other', but she is their child. A child is a being who is similar and different at the same time: Adam begat a child who was like him, in his image. A child is a reproduction or copy of the parent. Kinship- image and likeness- with God is a natural gift that people pass on to their children. Son of Seth, son of Adam, son of God: the original and ultimate source of Jesus' procreation, and of all people's, is God.

The Chinese have a saying that in order to be a great person, one must write a book, plant a tree and have a child. They see transcendence in these three actions: their magnitude cannot be measured in one person's lifetime. The Bible, on the other hand, takes a very skeptical stance with regard to writing a book:

*Besides being a sage,  
 Qoheleth also taught his knowledge to the people,  
 having weighed, studied and amended a great many  
 proverbs.  
 Qoheleth tried to write in an attractive style  
 and to set down truthful thoughts  
 in a straightforward manner.  
 One last thing, my son,  
 be warned that writing books involves endless hard  
 work,  
 and that much study wearies the body.  
 To sum up the whole matter:  
 fear God and keep his commandments,  
 since that is the whole duty of man.* (Qo. 12:9-13)

In Scripture children are always considered a gift from Yahweh. The mutual ordination of husband and wife to a great extent has its reason for being in procreation, although not exclusively.

Generation is the effect of Yahweh's blessing. Israel hopes to become as numerous as the stars in the heavens and the sand on the seashore. Multiplication does not depend on people alone. Children are a blessing from Yahweh. In Israel, children are parents' most fervent desire. Israel itself was born of a miracle. The wives of the patriarchs were sterile. Sarah did not believe she would ever be fertile. Rebekah had children only after Isaac prayed to Yahweh on her behalf. Rachel, who loved Jacob, was driven to desperation by her barrenness:

*"Give me children, or I shall die!" she said.*

To which Jacob replied:

*"Am I in God's place? It is he who has denied you motherhood."* (Gn. 30:2)

Gn. 1:28; 12:2;  
 15:5; 26:4;  
 22:17

Ho. 2:1

Gn. 16:1ff

Gn. 25:21



Gn. 22:12

Life is sacred; a child is a gift from God; it is a sacred thing given by God to man and woman. Parents are bearers, witnesses and stewards of the divine gift of life, which is why the life of their children does not belong to them. Not even in the most primitive stage of Israel's history, in spite of its patriarchal society, could the father dispose of his children's lives as he wished: he was not allowed to sacrifice them, or sell them, even when they were men with a great faith in the true God, like Abraham.

Gn. 22:11ff

Parents transmit life the way God does: truly and forever. Even though they give life, they do not have the right to take it away for any reason whatsoever, because life is God's exclusive property. Life is the divine spark that people carry inside, which is why they are expected to defend it, respect it and give it up for others.

The attitude that parents are supposed to have toward their children's lives is veneration, attention and respect. Respect clearly does not exclude orientation, guidance and motivation. The gift of being able to give life imposes the obligation of orienting, guiding and motivating it.

Psalm 127:3 presents children as a reward from Yahweh; Psalm 128 calls them a blessing that falls on the man who fears Yahweh. Psalm 113 praises Yahweh, who blesses the barren woman with the joy of children. Children fill their parents with honor and pride, and offer them joy and a helping hand.

Qoheleth also does not see an abundance of children as an absolute value:

*Perhaps a man has had a hundred sons and as many daughters...  
and then derives no benefit from his estate,  
not even a tomb to call his own.  
Why then I say, better the untimely born than he.*  
(Qo. 6:3)

The Book of Proverbs tells children:  
*Listen to your father who begot you,  
do not despise your mother in her old age.  
The father of the virtuous man will rejoice indeed,  
he who fathers a wise man will have joy of it.  
May you be the joy of your father,  
the gladness of her who bore you!* (Pr. 23:22-25)

To the Hebrew way of thinking, the father bears the main responsibility for a household's proper functioning; thus the word 'family' is Hebrew translates as *father's house*.

Procreating a child must be one of the most personal and human events of a person's life. It demands a maximum of awareness, responsibility and freedom. What is most inherent to people is not the instinctive and biological level of their being, but the degree to which they assume their parental responsibility. Among the disadvantages of birth control, there is one advantage, and an important one at that: it makes parents more aware and responsible when bringing a child into this world. Let us hope that responsible parenthood will make parents more responsible.

Being a parent is the noblest task that God gave people, which is why he gave them a law to go with it that reveals the gift. It is also the noblest act that God

finds in people, which is why he wanted to be called Abba, Father, by Jesus and by all people.

The proper attitude that people should take toward God is that of a trusting and faithful son or daughter, while God takes the role of a loving and faithful Father.

*If you, then, who are evil,  
know how to give your children what is good,  
how much more will your Father in heaven  
give good things to those who ask him!* (Mt. 7:11)

Parents' love for their children is disinterested and transparent. A child is like the parents' masterpiece; she is flesh of their flesh and bone of their bones, a prolonging of their own person that has grown up at their side like a budding flower. She is like a continuation, a complement of their being, a perfecting of their intimate self. Their past is projected into the future. For their child, they want what they never had for themselves, everything they lacked in their childhood. They put their life experience at the service of one whose life is beginning. Parents live for their children; they take pleasure in them, and see their reflection in them. A man knows that his child was conceived in the arms of his beloved wife. He was born of the pain of that woman. Both father and mother have shed tears and spent many sleepless nights; both have had to teach him his first words; both have held his hand as he took his first steps, and picked him up after he fell. They have discovered that their children were also made in the image and likeness of their parents.

When they are little, children regard their parents as something more than an ideal; they are the object of their admiration and veneration. It is a veneration that starts out as an instinct, spontaneously, and that should persist as a sign of personal piety. For a son or a daughter, parents are to be respected always, and not just respected, but also venerated in a way. The problem for the parents is how to keep on being an object of admiration and veneration for their children. What principles should they pass on, and how should they be planted so that they will take firm root and produce good fruit?

Jesus knew that God is Father. Father of all people, not just of Israel. Father of the good and the bad.

Mt. 5:45

God is authentically Father to all people. This is one of the most unique and surprising aspects of Jesus' message. God loves us the way a Father loves his children, not the way a king loves his subjects, or a brother loves his brothers, or a shepherd his sheep, or a hen her chicks. Jesus loved nature, and saw his love and God's reflected in it. Nothing could be more natural and divine than a Father's love for his children.

## Human Suffering

Suffering means bearing physical or moral ills, pain, disease, anguish, sorrow, adversity, want, offense and anything else that brings about distress or distortion in human life. Suffering always involves a sense of loneliness. Accompanying a suffering person means feeling compassion for her, but not being with her.

Jb. 2:13

When it is impossible to alleviate another person's suffering, the only proper course to follow is respect.

Not everything is happy in human life; suffering occupies a prominent place. It comes unexpectedly and inevitably. It becomes, at least for a time, a way of living, not just a passing phenomenon.

In the Old Testament, suffering was seen as a universal reality, as an evil that ought not to exist, that people cannot resign themselves to and that they should not love for its own sake.

Suffering is a crisis that forces people to look deeply into the meaning, value and sense of their life. There are certain things that people can only see through the tears in their eyes. Many other things are forced onto people, who have no option but to accept them, after having resisted learning them voluntarily. Suffering thus has a teaching as well as a kerygmatic function: it announces and creates dissatisfaction and hope.

It is impossible to run away forever. God is not mute, and the world is not silent. The time comes when people have to stop so that they can listen and respond. Suffering is a moment of genuine encounter with oneself, with others, with life and with God. God has encountered many people and many saints, like Saint Ignatius of Loyola, in pain or in sorrow.

The Bible looks forward to the coming of the Messiah as a time of healing, of liberation, of resurrection. Healing is one of Yahweh's works. All public and private afflictions are evils that will be lifted from the people when the Messiah comes.

Jb. 14:1;  
Pr. 3:8; 4:22;  
41:30;  
Si. 31:20  
Ps. 6:38 41:88

Is. 33:24;  
26:19; 61:2  
  
Is. 19:22;  
57:18; 53:4-5

Suffering demands a kind of spirituality from people, a way to deal with it and bear it, not an explanation. It does not demand a rational response. It is true that people express their pain with a question, but what they really need is an attitude with which to face it, not an answer. People are not interested in a diagnosis; what they want is to get out from under the suffering, or else to have the strength to bear it.

Just as there are times to love, to believe, to hope, to serve, or to listen, there are also times when it is impossible to understand what is happening. History, circumstances and moments sometimes surpass our capacity to understand them rationally. It almost seems to be a law of the mind that the more we are involved in a problem, such as moral anguish or physical pain, the more incapable we are of understanding it.

There are times when we are not called to understand, but simply to be present in the face of the mystery of an unintelligible or desperate situation. It is not the time to understand or explain; it is time to show presence of mind.

If the moment is critical, it is to be expected that the crisis will cut deeply into people's hearts. Time has a great deal to say, and we need to let it pass in order to hear its lessons. The temporal dimension is very important for putting events into perspective. What cannot be accepted and comprehended today, perhaps will be accepted and comprehended tomorrow.

There is an old saying that no one is a good judge of their own cause. No matter how refined a sense of

proportion and justice people might have, they lose perspective when the crisis is theirs. They must step back a bit in order to see themselves in the mirror.

Not judging, or not thinking, should never be elevated to the status of values; but reserving judgment or thought and simply assimilating the situation or history can be a wise course to take, at least until inner peace and silence allow people to listen and understand.

The Bible message presents suffering for what it is in life: an unresolved problem, the secret of which only faith is capable of discerning in Jesus' suffering. There we see not only the attitude of love, faithfulness and presence with which Jesus confronts suffering, but also the disorder of creation and human behavior, as well as God's redeeming love.

To a certain extent, anything can serve to explain the problem of suffering: injuries can have a natural cause, disease is normal in a living being, hostile forces are to be expected in the universe, sin leads to calamity, etc. But nothing really manages to explain suffering to the person in pain, because none of these causes is outside of God's scope. God himself is involved in them. The patriarchs, prophets and wise men all had their encounter with the mystery of pain. In Scripture, suffering is presented as a means of purification:

*A crucible for silver,  
a furnace for gold,  
but Yahweh for the testing of hearts!* (Pr. 17:3)

Ps. 77:17  
Jr. 9:6;  
Ps 65:10

Suffering can have educational value as a kind of paternal correction. Suffering can even turn out to be a way of entering into communion with others, despite the fact that people suffer alone. Suffering is a form of revelation for the prophets. Moses and the prophets are prefigurations of Jesus, the suffering servant of Yahweh. Jesus suffers and lets God be God, and humans be humans, but with his faithfulness, obedience and acceptance he gives meaning to suffering. He fulfills the prophecy of the servant of Yahweh, burdened with our sorrows, feeling compassion and alleviating all our pain. Jesus, however, did not do away with suffering. He consoles and encourages; he declares that suffering for his sake and the Gospel's, is a blessing.

Dt. 8:5;  
Pr. 3:11-12

For Saint Paul, suffering is one of the most valuable, not to mention inescapable, ways of entering into communion with Jesus. All people are called, at some point and to some extent, to reproduce the image of the suffering Christ, and in this way reproduce the image of the glorious Christ. Saint Paul sees suffering as a sign of special communion with Jesus and a pledge of future glory; it serves the cause of intercession and redemption.

Is. 53:4  
Mt. 8:17

Ga. 2:20

Lk. 24:26

Following Christ in his suffering means, in the first place, trying to avoid it whenever possible; and when this is not possible, confronting it with faithfulness to God, to others, to history, to the circumstances that cannot be changed. For Christians too, it is necessary to suffer many things and in that way, enter into glory. But this must not lead to complacency in the face of suffering; we should never pretend that suffering is anything less than a crisis. Casual acceptance of suf-



fering is not Christian. That might be the stance a Stoic philosopher would take in order to bear suffering, or a fakir, but not a follower of Christ. Accepting pain without meaning or sense has nothing to do with the way Jesus confronted suffering, or with the way Christians are expected to bear it. Nor is it Christian not to accept suffering as an authentic path leading to communion with God and a deeper dimension of human life. Suffering is also a kind of revelation for people.

Seen as the perfect form of life, health is a greater gift than sickness, and we receive it in order to give our existence its full meaning, in an attitude of serenity. In human terms, and in the plan of salvation, health is the ideal state. It is what we should tend toward if we really want to glorify God in our bodies. We should never do ourselves harm and think that we are pleasing Jesus; much less should we do harm to others. Saint Irenaeus wrote that the glory of God consists of the whole perfection of the living person, and the person's life in communion with Christ. God does not take pleasure in pain and suffering, but rather in the attitude with which a person confronts them or overcomes them.

Cf. 1 Co. 6:20

Mt. 10:38;  
Lk. 14:27;

Mt. 16:24;  
Mk. 8:34

Following Jesus is equivalent to going against ourselves. The ideal would be to follow him with all our human potential. But sometimes it is necessary to carry our cross and deny ourselves in order to take a step forward.

Jesus is not an enemy of human fulfillment; on the contrary, he is its greatest champion. He is the one who leads people to their fulfillment, even though following him implies immediate and frequent

demands that can cause suffering in thousands of ways.

Sorrow and pain touch people's most sensitive nerves, and move them in the depths of their heart. And in the presence of a suffering person, others should adopt an attitude of profound respect, as if they were standing before a sacred mystery.

God is extraordinarily sensitive to those who suffer. Suffering never stops demanding that we look for a meaning, which can only be perceived and appreciated on the level of faith.

Suffering can turn into a spiritual gift, that is, a special sign from God so that a person cooperates with Jesus' work of salvation on behalf of all people. It can become a good thing, in terms of communion with Christ, who incarnates in physical illness. This is why suffering is ambivalent, a crisis that can either fulfill people or annihilate them. There is a sense of temptation about it, and in the Old Testament it was seen as linked to sin. From a comprehensive standpoint, we can say that one of the causes of human suffering is sin, that Jesus' passion is a consequence of concrete sins, and that in everyday life, the sin of one person makes others suffer.

We should not be surprised that suffering brings crisis and temptation to people, and that they cannot find answers to their questions. All of this happened to Jesus of Nazareth as well. What people need in order to confront suffering is an attitude like Jesus'.

1 P. 1:7; 4:1

Rm. 5:3ff;

2 Co. 4:16; 5:10  
Rm. 8:28

Suffering highlights people's weakness and their dependence on God, and on everything. It tests faith, protects from sin, plants the seed of hope, leads to good; but it is also a temptation, a crisis. It is the strongest force that can defeat people and make them lose their faith. Prayer in suffering strengthens people. Some pain can only be borne in prayer.

Human suffering, suffered in communion with Christ, benefits all of humanity and becomes a saving, sanctifying act. And because its meaning is not readily apparent, we can say that suffering is a mystery.

In the Bible and in life, suffering continues to be an unresolved problem, with no satisfying answer. It demands a certain attitude of people: they should struggle against it whenever possible, and when this is impossible, they should accept it faithfully as a path that leads to an encounter with God, others and oneself.

## **People Grow Old**

Greek philosophers believed that children were associated with innocence; young people with strength, boldness and beauty; adults with the fullness of their faculties, merit and prestige; and old people with wisdom. In the same way, each life stage evoked different attitudes: childhood was regarded with tender affection; youth, with admiration and vigor; adulthood, with respect; and old age with reverence.

All of life was seen as a single process of maturing. Each stage was one more step toward the culmination of life. All efforts were aimed at acquiring the value that comes with old age: wisdom. It seemed to the Greeks that a lifetime was barely time enough to attain that which belonged to the elderly. What a shame that they only achieved it at the end!

Childhood was valued for the endless possibilities that it opened up; youth, for the projects undertaken; adulthood, for the manifest achievements; and old age, for inner fulfillment. A person needed to give up certain values in order to attain others. There was no such thing as a straight line to maturity; people had to go through a process, with unexpected turns. Each stage was ushered in by a kind of paroxysm of bodily development, a change that always implied a struggle. It was considered normal that each stage tried to retain something of the preceding stage, so a person needed fortitude to keep from identifying so much with one age that he would not want to advance to the next. All fixations were false, and time would take care of demonstrating as much. It was painful to admit that when the spirit reached maturity, the body began to wear out. The upward curve of life took on a double meaning: physically it led to ruin; spiritually it led to fulfillment. Wisdom served to turn tragedy into serenity, transience into eternity. And the fundamental concern of old people was purification.

In a utilitarian world such as ours, growing old is a catastrophe. Old age is seen as a period of stagnation where people are stuck with all the irreversible habits and prejudices acquired in the course of their life. The elderly are almost always denied the right to adapt,

and since many of them are weary anyway, they do not mind waiving a right that demands effort. Many people believe that the way to be considerate with old people is to indulge their prejudices and stubbornness.

Old people's capacity for change and adaptation is greater than we are often willing to admit. We do not have the right to deny them the capacity to make an effort.

The elderly are not people who belong in the past; they are people who deserve to be heard now, because they have something to say. Wisdom is a fine wine that took a lifetime to age. There is no one who does not have a valuable secret or treasure deep down in their soul. Life is full of history and tradition, and the elderly are the stewards of that treasure. We find it easy to cherish antiques as valuable collector's items, or as decorative objects, but we rarely appreciate the human wealth that an old person can transmit.

Old age is a time for serene reflection and inner growth. It is a time for assessment, and prayer. This was the prayer of the elderly:

*God, you taught me when I was young,  
and I am still proclaiming your marvels.  
Now that I am old and gray,  
God, do not desert me;  
let me live to tell the rising generation  
about your strength and power, about your heavenly  
righteousness, God.* (Ps. 71:17-18)

In Scripture, the life of an old person is valued in itself, not only for its usefulness. It is valued because it is a life that has been lived:

*You are to rise up before gray hairs,  
you are to honor old age  
and fear your God.  
I am Yahweh.*

(Lv. 19:32)

It usually happens that when there is no respect for the elderly, life in general is not valued either. We may wish to deny it, but we are a continuous, although implicit, reference to our parents, to our ancestors. A people without traditions is a people without values, and young people should see the aged as worthy of veneration.

We all know young people who are dejected, without ideals, strung out on drugs, absent, selfish, eager to steal and to live off others. They have already bought their ticket to jail, the hospital, the insane asylum and perhaps, finally, to definitive frustration.

The fact that we look at youth today with all the characteristics of the Greek mindset and a few others- and not as tragic- and that we see only the drama of old age, and not the purification, reveals a notable lack of reflection and understanding of life on our part.

It is normal for old people to lose strength and even authority. That is the way it has to be, because they must realize that they can acquire strength and authority in life, but they cannot hold on to them forever. Power, money and comforts tie people to this world, and they end up isolated and enslaved before

they realize it. The road to self-encounter and encounter with God requires that people take leave of everything, including themselves.

Old people need a bit of security, a lot of affection, a certain amount of stimulation, and confirmation of the value of their life, no matter how useless it may seem, and above all, of their person. All of this is payment they deserve for everything they have done; denying it to them could very well be an injustice. Old people need understanding, and not just a way to pass the time. Old people need dreams, not just memories.

The need for continuous, adapted education does not refer only to the intellect. Old people need help walking; they need security so that they can advance in their final days, which should be happier, and not harder, than when they were middle-aged.

Old people have grown weak; they are no longer up to mountain-climbing. But that is no reason to treat them as invalids.

Knowing how to age is a secret reserved for heroes and the wise. It takes courage to recognize that others are not unjust; that it is reasonable to step back; that it is time to relinquish responsibilities; that the value of experience is a very relative value, and that the highest values are not the monopoly of one person; that it is necessary to pass on the light and not hold on to it, because when a person tries to hold on to it, it goes out, and because that torch must go forward in relay. It can be important to remember the past in order to live the present better, but it is not right to pine away for the past or to want to bring it back.

All people's lives are headed toward a final and definitive encounter. Old age is a once-in-a-lifetime trial, and living it requires a lifetime of accumulated energy. The act of maturing is a privilege. It is a sign, and a grace.

## Death, Fullness of Life

For Descartes, the main issue was existence. He went so far as to doubt, in a methodical way, his own existence. And he solved the problem with a reflection that seems almost amusing now: *I think, therefore I am*. The category that he thought with and his frame of reference was existence.

We do not define the main issue in terms of existence. Of all that exists in the universe, there is much more that is concealed than is apparent: for one thing, our world contains much more material underground than on the surface. The real issue is presence, meaning, awareness. People do not take their lives to solve "the problem of existence," but to escape meaninglessness, when they perceive they do not matter to anyone, not even to themselves.

Descartes defines his problem in terms of existence; the Bible defines it in terms of presence, meaning, value. More important, and even more fundamental, than knowing if I exist is knowing in whose presence I exist, who I exist for, and what value my existence has.



Like suffering, and perhaps even more so, death is an unresolved problem in the Old Testament. It is the most pathetic scene in the drama of life. The happiness of living ends with a peaceful death after a long life. Death appears as something terrible and meaningless.

*Anyone who is linked with all that live, still has some hope,*

*a live dog being better than a dead lion.*

*The living know at least that they will die,*

*the dead know nothing;*

*no more reward for them, their memory has passed out of mind.*

*Their loves, their hates, their jealousies, these all have perished,*

*nor will they ever again take part in whatever is done under the sun.*

*Go, eat your bread with joy*

*and drink your wine with a glad heart;*

*for what you do God has approved beforehand.*

*Wear white all the time,*

*do not stint your head of oil.*

*Spend your life with the woman you love*

*through all the fleeting days of life*

*that God has given you under the sun;*

*for this is the lot assigned to you in life and in the efforts you exert under the sun.*

*Whatever work you propose to do, do it while you can,*

*for there is neither achievement, nor planning,*

*nor knowledge, nor wisdom in Sheol*

*where you are going.*

(Qo. 9:4-10)

*Yet the almond tree is in flower,*

*the grasshopper is heavy with food*

*and the caper bush bears its fruit,  
while man goes to his everlasting home.  
And the mourners are already walking to and fro in  
the street  
before the silver cord has snapped,  
or the golden lamp been broken,  
or the pitcher shattered at the spring,  
or the pulley cracked at the well,  
or before the dust returns to the earth as it once came  
from it,  
and the breath to God that gave it...* (Qo. 12:5-8)

*O death, how bitter it is to remember you  
for a man at peace among his goods.* (Si. 41:1)

Death was considered a catastrophe for people, intimately linked to their sinful condition. In the best of cases, there remains some hope of resurrection for the just. In Jesus' time not everyone believed in resurrection.

2 M. 7:9-36  
Mt. 22:23;  
Mk. 12:18;  
Lk. 20:27

*The life that we live is not ours, but God's.  
No man can master the wind  
so as to hold it back,  
nor control the day of death.  
There is no discharge in time of war...* (Qo. 8:8)

This belonging to God is what makes life sacred. The depths of people's hearts conceal their secret: life is marked with the sense of otherness. What is most inherent to people is the fact that their life is not theirs. They received it as a gift; they are like stewards of their own life. They identify with their life, which is why they must give themselves to themselves as a gift.

Life is a kind of sign; it is a sacrament, but we must not confuse the sign with the meaning, or the sacrament with what it manifests. The sign is life and the meaning is God. The one who gives life, and maintains it, and seeks it out in order to bring it to fullness by his side, is God. The most sacred thing that people have, their point of communion with God, is life. For everyone, life on earth is the seed of eternal life.

It is not a bad idea to reflect on death when a person is born, because every birth is an existential reference to death, which is its fulfillment. An even better idea is to talk about birth when a person dies, because dying is being born to a new life, different from earthly life but absolutely linked to it. For those who die in communion with God, death is a privilege. It is God's life in the fullness of participation with people.

When God gives life, he gives death. Life is an allusion to death, and dying means bringing life to its fullness.

Solomon said:

*Like all the others, I too am a mortal man,  
descendant of the first being fashioned from the earth,  
I was modeled in flesh within my mother's womb,  
for ten months taking shape in her blood  
by means of virile seed and pleasure, sleep's companion.  
I, too, when I was born drew in the common air,  
I fell on the same ground that bears us all,  
a wail my first sound, as for all the rest.  
I was nurtured in swaddling clothes, with every care.  
No king has known any other beginning of existence;  
for all there is one way only into life, as out of it. (Ws. 7:1-6)*

The gift of the living God is life and the right he gives us to offer it. When God gives life, he gives it truly and forever. Offering it does not mean losing it; it is rather the highest form of living it.

*The death of the devout  
costs Yahweh dear.*

(Ps. 116:15)

Dying means giving one's life over to God totally and definitively. This is why only humans possess life fully, because they are capable of giving it up, they realize that living means giving oneself, and dying means taking life to the extreme, to the ultimate, making the final tribute.

Life and death are not opposite or contradictory terms; they are complementary. Living and dying, birth and death, are fundamentally linked. They are joined by a relatively short lifespan. Accepting life means also accepting death. Dying means giving life up to the finish. And just as it is inherent to the living God to be living, so is it inherent to people to be dying.

Humans are the only beings that have the privilege of dying, that truly and authentically die, whose life energy cannot be left in an inanimate world and reduced to nothing. They are the only beings that die freely, because, even though they do not die at the time and in the way they choose, they have the power to accept death as it comes. They can give up their life. They can say, *Lord, as you will.*

Death inspires dismay, anguish and fear; it puts people in their place; it appraises their willingness to give. We are all called to be heroes and give up our

life. Death is not so much a punishment as an event that is essentially linked to the privilege of living.

When people die, they are usually highly occupied. The difficult task of dying absorbs all their energies. Pain, anxiety, loneliness, fear, and even despair are no more than symptoms of their own death. What is decisive about people is not what they do as they face imminent death; it is what they do throughout their life and with their life.

We do not become acquainted with death by dying, because each person's death is individual and unique. We come to know death in life. When we should reflect on death is at the best moments of our life. It is impossible to do a theology of death when one is dying.

At the end, when life becomes more intense because it is about to be completed in death, the only thing that matters, the only thing people can take with them, is the fact of having loved.

When we experience the death of our loved ones, we are dying little by little; we embrace in solidarity the way they personally give up their lives, and we realize that we too are dying. We give up something of ourselves every time a loved one dies.

We live our life profoundly when we know by whom and for whom we live. Religious people understand living as living for the Lord, and dying as dying for the Lord. People are the only beings who die praying. At Easter, when we celebrate the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we are also celebrating our own death

Rm 14:8-9

and resurrection. And our dying is a reference to Jesus Christ's death.

We are called to reproduce the image of Jesus not only in life, but also in death. He is the first-born of the dead. Dying with Christ is the next-to-last step, or the step previous to co-rising with Christ. Jesus' resurrection is the last word about people's death.

For Jesus, death had meaning; it was to return to the Father's house.

For Saint Paul, dying was a sort of co-dying with Christ, a way of entering into communion with him.

In John's Gospel, dying is the ultimate form of Jesus' presence in each person's life. Jesus has gone to prepare us a place, but he will come back to take us with him:

*And after I have gone and prepared you a place,  
I shall return to take you with me;  
so that where I am  
you may be too.*

(Jn. 14:3)

Rm. 8:29

Cf. Rm. 6:8  
2 Tm. 2:11;  
Col. 1:18

Cf. Jn. 13:3;  
14:2ff; 17:1ff

## Human Transcendence

People are the only creatures in the universe who aspire to be other than what they are. They want to be better; they want a fairer world, they want to live longer. They feel driven to reach the unreachable, to do the impossible, to believe in spite of the evidence,

to hope against hope, to live in the face of death, to love in opposition to hate. People are beings that demand more of themselves than they can give, that ask more than they can know, and that try to do more than they achieve.

The word 'transcendence' can have many meanings. It can refer to the anxiety or aspiration that people feel when they do not realize all their possibilities and yet feel the urgency to do so; when they understand that what exists and what they do, somehow point to something that is beyond their own limits. Being transcendent is one of humanity's greatest values.

People fulfill themselves as they transcend, as they get out of themselves and take an interest in others. Concern for others is not optional for people's development and maturity. People stop being human to the extent that they close up inside themselves and stop caring about others.

In this sense, being human implies always being hungry and thirsty; it means always being dissatisfied. Humans are the only beings that are discontented with their nature. Being human means wanting to be more than human. Only human beings feel the need to go beyond the concept and image they have of themselves in order to find fulfillment.

Transcendence does not mean denying what is concrete and real; it is rather the urge to go beyond experienced reality. In order to see clearly what their limits are, people need to stand outside of those limits. This is why people are always superior to themselves, greater than themselves. People may have their limits,

but they are the only beings who can realize what their limits are. An animal is so identified with its being and its world that it has no notion of its limits. People, on the other hand, go beyond their being and their world.

People are beings that do not identify exactly with what they are; this is what the word transcendence refers to. This non-identification with themselves is a source of anxiety, pain and greatness.

Transcendence is not a Biblical term. The human person in the Bible is presented as a unique and always transcendent being. Being human includes always listening for a call from someone. Being human means always being on the lookout for that someone, more than for some thing. In the Jewish mentality, being human means always waiting. They await the Messiah; Christians await resurrection.

In the personal fulfillment of her existence, the human person is not a being that relates to herself, but a being that refers to God at all times, either in a positive or a negative sense. This presupposes a certain personal consistence and self-consciousness; otherwise, she could not take a stance before God or be responsible and free.

A human being's transcendence is the essential and constitutive basis of his person and his responsibility, of the progress of his knowledge and human growth, of the accumulation of experience for confronting the unknown, of the possibility of receiving others and God; in a word, his love, revelation and grace his Spirit. The human person's transcendence makes him open to everything. An important characteristic of the



human person is the capacity to transcend himself; his concern for that which is different from himself; his solicitude for what is other.

People's practical intranscendence comes from their selfishness, their ignorance and their refusal to take on the mission that has been entrusted to them and their indifference to others. Substantial transcendence is achieved when people have a child, or do anything that takes them beyond their personal boundaries. Being a person means caring for something other than oneself. In this sense, God is also a person. He cares for you.

This talk of transcendence is not a way of attributing the treasures of humans to God, but of recognizing God in humans' treasures. It means recognizing a God who is more intimate and inherent than even one's own intimacy, and in a certain sense, recognizing the divine in each human person. From the beginning people are transcendent, because they partake of God's life.

Gn. 9:5-12;  
4:15

Human transcendence is each person's inner, essential relationship with Jesus Christ. And the entire world is linked forever to God's presence, which reached its most sublime expression in the historical presence of Jesus.

Jesus makes himself present, and makes his demands of us, in others, in those most in need: *I was hungry and you gave me food, etc.*

Mt. 25:35

Because people are transcendent, their actions are transcendent, and have a value and meaning that go

beyond their own limits: what people do has a meaning for God. In Scripture, transcendence is to be found in everything people do and, therefore, as people's destiny, as the eternal meaning and value of the human condition. Thus it can be said that on earth, people are sowing. And they will reap what they sow. Those that sow evil will not normally, or naturally, reap good.

The human person, *made of earth and of the Earth*, is on a journey.

*For us, our homeland is in heaven,  
and from heaven comes the Savior we are waiting for,  
the Lord Jesus Christ,  
and he will transfigure these wretched bodies of ours  
into copies of his glorious body.  
He will do that by the same power  
with which he can subdue the whole universe.* (Ph. 3:20)

2Co. 3:18

## Resurrection

People who know themselves to be to be transcendent with respect to the temporality of life, and who have even experienced this transcendence, will inevitably feel anxious at not knowing for sure and in detail what will happen to them after death.

The Israelites believed that Yahweh had power over the kingdom of the dead. He could free a person from the kingdom of the dead. Yahweh had the power to bring those who had died back to life, as he did through the prayers of Elijah and Elisha.

Dt. 32:22;  
Jb. 26:6  
Pr 15: 11;  
Ps. 30:4;  
Si. 51:2;  
1 K. 17:17;  
2 K. 4:32ff

Lk. 7:11; Mt. 9:18;  
Jn. 11:1; Ac. 9:36; 20:7

Jesus brought the dead back to life; Peter and Paul did, too, like the Prophets.

Regardless of whether some manage to come back to life after death, the issue here is: What happens to people after death? One answer could be that they simply terminate, from which it follows that their life has no transcendence, no meaning. Because in the face of the end or the limit, whatever does not have its complete meaning, has no meaning at all. No scale of values can resist the limit: *For if the dead are not raised... and if Christ has not been raised... let us eat and drink today; tomorrow we shall be dead.*

1 Co. 15: 17-18, 33

Man would be a passion that is consumed senselessly (Sartre); the most sensible thing to do would be to put an end to what is senseless.

There is little that we know about eternal life, because much of what is said on the subject is more about the present than the future. The metaphors that Jesus uses to talk about the next life are not meant to disclose the secrets of eternity; on the contrary, their intention is to give earthly existence a meaning that transcends this world. His proclamation of eternal life is not about giving us a peek over to "the other side"; it is way to insist on the importance of "this side".

In the Old Testament, eternal life was an unknown factor, as it seems to have been for Jesus of Nazareth as well. The resurrection was a genuine revelation, of Jesus' fate and of ours. Jesus' resurrection was not a coming back to life, the way he himself brought several people back to life: his friend Lazarus, and the son of the widow of Nain.

Jesus was raised to a new and different life; his resurrection meant that he would not die again, that he was the principle of life itself, the beginning and the end of the life of all people.

Lk 7:11  
Jn 11:1ff

Jesus' resurrection was not a case of reviving, like the miracles that Jesus performed during his life. It was a different kind of resurrection, an event that revealed the fate of the human person and of Jesus. Through his resurrection, Jesus was made Messiah and Lord, as well as the only Son of the Living God. Jesus' resurrection is the clearest message people have about their own destiny, even clearer than Jesus' own words. In Jesus, actions are as revealing as words.

Ph 2:9ff;  
Rm 1:4

We have no comparison to express what it means for the human person to live God's life in fullness. This world simply does not contain words, concepts or images that can describe that reality; it goes utterly beyond the space and time that we inhabit.

For the Hebrews, dying meant going back to the earth from which they had been formed, giving their life back to God, who had given it to them. All that was left of the dead was a kind of shadow, incapable of enjoying God or praising him. People faded away.

Under the influence of Greek thought, some Hebrews began to believe that the soul survived death, and that people were raised from death to be judged according to their merits or sins. The Sadducees refused to accept this teaching because it did not belong to the original message of the Pentateuch. In Jesus' view, eternal life was implicit in the proclamation of the Kingdom, and was in fact its

fulfillment. Eternal life was what made sense of human suffering and earthly undertakings. It was freely given, like the forgiveness of our sins, and God's love. At the same time, it was the reward or result of following Jesus, of fulfilling his commandments and of faith in him. People in and of themselves were as mortal as animals. Immortality, eternal life, was a gift from God.

The answer to the problem of the totality of life, therefore, is not to be found on this side of death, but on the other side. Only in the light of an end that we cannot yet see or experience, can we understand the life we are living. The transcendence of the human person is that total reference to what is and constitutes the eschatological dimension, i.e., that which looks ahead to the end times.

It must be emphasized that the next life is not understood as a temporally continuous extension of this life, but rather as something completely different, but also completely linked to this life, the way a tree is the fullness, the realization of the seed, and absolutely linked to it.

*It is the same with the resurrection of the dead:  
the thing that is sown is perishable but what is raised is  
imperishable;  
the thing that is sown is contemptible but what is  
raised is glorious;  
the thing that is sown is weak but what is raised is  
powerful;  
when it is sown it embodies the soul, when it is raised  
it embodies the spirit.* (1 Co. 15:42)

The first man, Adam, and the human person in this life, are made of *earth and of the Earth* by nature... a living soul; the second Adam, Christ, and the resurrected person, are from *heaven, and heavenly... a life-giving spirit*. This parallelism is not just between Adam and Christ, but also between earthly life and eternal life.

1 Co. 15:45-49

The Creed affirms the resurrection of the flesh. The issue, however, is not which flesh and which body the resurrected person will have. The affirmation does not refer so much to the integrity of the flesh as to the integrity of the person. The point, in other words, is that this very same being that I am will be raised with this very same body, but in a spiritualized form. The body is not so much part as form of our personal being. When we affirm the resurrection of the flesh, we are not concerned with the flesh as such, but with the resurrection of the whole person, not just a disembodied soul. Belief in a soul that is immortal, but with no perpetual tie to the concrete and historical dimension of its human condition, is not the faith of the Church. The Church believes in the resurrection of the whole person, however that is understood, and not just of the soul as one of its parts. It would be more accurate to say that the subject of resurrection is the person, not the soul, not the body, and that the person is more than these two things together, the object of God's eternal care and love.

If the identity of the flesh seems to receive undue attention, it is to counteract the unfounded affirmation, or supposition, that the soul is reborn in another body in a kind of reincarnation. A person's identity depends on the uniqueness and singularity of her

bodily existence. We affirm the fact of resurrection, even though we do not know and cannot conjecture when or how it will occur. Even Jesus' discourse on the subject does not go beyond the level of images. The revelation is not about when and how, but about the fact of resurrection itself, and the future reality is affirmed in order to give the present moment its full transcendence.

It is generally thought that resurrection will happen at the end of time, the end of history, and as a function of the last judgment, as if people were resurrected for the express purpose of judged. We understand resurrection to be the fullness of personal participation in divine life, given in and through Jesus Christ, the first sign and pledge of which is the earthly life we are leading now. Given the link between Jesus' resurrection and our own, what we can affirm with the greatest certainty is what we know about Jesus' resurrection.

The faith in the resurrection of the dead is not a central and fundamental tenet of only Paul's preaching, but of the entire New Testament. What is affirmed is the continuity of the whole human person, and a destiny like Jesus'. On this point, Christian anthropology reaches its fullness only by appealing to Christology. And what we affirm about Jesus is true for the human person as well, that just as no fruit is capable of revealing to us the earth's immense life-giving power, no theologian or sage or saint can reveal to us the eternal meaning of our human condition. Only Jesus can.

1 Co. 15:12-23;  
Mk 12:25-27;  
Ac. 17:18-23;  
Cf. 1 Th. 5:23;  
Jn. 17:24; 14:3.

Job spoke, and said:

*Ah, would that these words of mine were written down,  
inscribed on some monument  
with iron chisel and engraving tool,  
cut into the rock for ever!  
This I know, that my Avenger lives,  
and he, the Last, will take his stand on earth.  
After my awaking, he will set me close to him,  
and from my flesh I shall look on God.  
He whom I shall see will take my part;  
these eyes will gaze on him and find him not aloof.*

(Jb. 19: 23-27)



# 3 Humanity in the World

## Humanity as Lord and Master

People do not establish relationships only with God and other people; their existence unfolds in a surrounding world that is absolutely essential to it. From the beginning, the world was made for people, and not people for the world. It is therefore people who bring the world to fullness and endow it with their meaning. Having come into being out of the depths of the earth, people must look for the goal that reveals their worth and meaning. Their aspirations must be superior to their acquisitions; their laws to their achievements; their dreams to their reality; their goals must be surpassed always, their ends must be greater than their needs.

Protagoras said that the human person was the measure of all things, and we could say that the measure of all people is Jesus, and the measure of Jesus, God. Saint Paul was more eloquent than Protagoras, evoking more a sense of belonging than proportionality.

*Everything belongs to you,  
but you belong to Christ,  
and Christ belongs to God.* (1 Co. 3:21-22)

The world is the medium where the person becomes human, where she finds herself, others and

God. In order to think about God, people need to look at the world; that is why it is so important to train our eye and tune our ear to the beauty of the music and love hidden in all things. Our ideas and images of God might not be very accurate; they might not correspond to reality, but not his love. Reality is the best expression of God's love.

The world is not what separates people from God, it is rather the expression of God, the sign of God, what unites us to God. The meaning of earthly things is illuminated by the Incarnation, when the Son of God takes on earthly nature and makes it perpetually his. God took the material world and human nature and made them his most personal sacrament, i.e., the medium by which he expresses himself and communicates most directly.

The world demands interpretation, and people can do it by crying or singing. Concrete facts do not transmit any message; matter in itself does not either. The cathedral of Chartres, for example, is more than the stone it is made of. For meaning to arise, three elements are needed: art, the artist and the person capable of perceiving it. Reality does not lend itself to a single interpretation. Each thing, situation or person is a symbol and demands to be interpreted. Reality is a lump of clay that can take on many forms.

The author of the Psalms asked the heavens to speak to him of God, and when the sun went down, the sky proclaimed Yahweh's works. He asked a bird to speak to him of God, and the bird broke into song; he asked for help, and found the way to defend himself. He put his trust in God, and never felt let down.

His faith in God was a way to interpret the world and history, a way to live in them. The only way God can speak to people is in a way that they can understand him.

The world is not there just to be made use of; it is also important to value it. People need to recover their capacity for wonder; wonder is what has led people to science and to God. The world is not threatened by a lack of expertise or knowledge; when it is not valued, however, it runs a grave risk. When the capacity for wonder is lost, the capacity for valuing things is lost with it.

In the realm of human relations, fraternity is also based on recognizing true value. A person's solidarity with others grows as he comes to value them. Everyone knows that en masse, people become dehumanized and dehumanize others. Being human is not the verification of an abstract concept; it means living in the world, side by side with things and people that are valued and loved.

Valuing the world is more important than possessing it, and loving other people is more important than knowing them.

It is easy for people to get lost in nature and in a world so full of things, and to end up living like a worm in a piece of fruit. But they can also attain inner knowledge of the many gifts they have been blessed with and give thanks. They can value them and transcend them, and not just make use of them. Things are gifts; they convey a meaning of love in addition to their own inner meaning and their beauty. Value is not

Ps. 19:1ff

a superstructure or a varnish that is put on things; it is their intrinsic reality. It is the pearl hidden inside the oyster; it is a great mountain with a boundless horizon, not a tomb.

Without an awareness of a task or a duty in the world, people feel like parasites. The world imposes itself on people as something that must be heeded and understood. The world is a challenge on the conscious level, on the physical level, on the religious level.

A man once cursed his luck and cursed God because he had no shoes, while others drove by in flashy cars, too absorbed to notice those who lacked basic necessities. Resentful, and with good reason, he turned unreasonably against God. Then he came across a man who had neither feet nor legs, sitting on a makeshift wagon and pushing himself forward with his hands. The legless man asked him if he could spare a coin, for the love of God.

The man pointed to his shoeless feet as a way of showing that he had no coin to spare. Then he thought to himself: I may not have shoes, but I have feet and legs. God has given me feet and hands to fight for a better world. This man has no money, and shoes would do him no good at all, but he talks of God's love and goes on his way.

## **The Things of Nature**

From the beginning, human beings have been given the divine mission of subduing the earth, of being lord

and master, of making use of the world to meet their needs. Humans are not only made of earth; the earth belongs to them. *To Yahweh belong the earth and all it holds, the heavens and the earth.* But he has given it to the human race.

Ps. 24:1; 89:12

*For the land belongs to me, and to me you are only strangers and guests...* (Lv. 25:23)

*Heaven belongs to Yahweh, earth he bestows on man.* (Ps. 115:16)

Even though people make use of others and surround themselves with servants, their true calling is to be a companion and a friend, more than a Lord. Their lordliness is not so much about carving out what is theirs as about sharing. Their exploitation of things should also include care and stewardship for these same things, which is a kind of service to other people.

Everybody needs a vital space in order to be human. This applies to all the dimensions in which humans live their lives: psychology, feelings, spirituality, religion, even physical space.

In order to value things, people must first value their own life. The meaning of things usually comes from one's own meaning.

In prehistoric times people had to defend themselves from nature. If they ever identified with it, they saw themselves as an untamed part of their surroundings. Their world the jungle and its animals were hostile, and people lived by hunting.

The challenge for contemporary civilization is not to destroy but to protect the environment; otherwise the world is left polluted and impoverished of plant and animal life. People need to watch over the natural world like alert sentries, and nurture it like careful gardeners.

Only by identifying with nature can people overcome the primitive condition of prehistoric humanity—savage, ignorant and brutish.

The kind of person that nature needs is not a hippie who walks around naked like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, but someone who feels committed to nature, down to the lowliest bacterium. Our descendants will look back and shake their heads at our criminal obstinacy in hunting sea turtles or not doing enough to conserve panda habitat.

People are called to be zealous guardians of the natural world. They must show themselves to be faithful and prudent stewards of what has been entrusted to them. Their concern for the world should point up their concern for others.

Mt. 25:14ff

What is most important in the Bible is not the world, or the message about its origin, but rather God's care for the world, its history and people in particular.

## **The World, Object of Knowledge**

The world is the object of people's scrutiny; it is made to be known by them. With their mind, people have gradually mastered the universe. They are the consciousness of the entire universe; their singing makes them who they are; they participate in the hymn of creation and interpret it.

Over the centuries, science and the most illustrious scientists have managed to discover for humanity much of what God has been doing since the beginning.

People are supposed to explore the world and look into its hidden nooks and crannies, as if it were a garden full of treasures and wonders. The world is not a place where God hides; it is the place where God is encountered. All things, and especially those that pertain to human beings, should be open to people's experience and experimentation. Timid souls who think that science will destroy their faith, do not believe very strongly. Faith is not a veil but a lamp. The faithful do not demand to see things as different from the way they are; they want to see them in the light of revelation

To reveal means to uncover, to pull back the veil. Faith is a kind of discovery because people discover a way to look at the world and act in it that does not



derive exclusively from empirical knowledge or limit itself to tangible things.

Faith has disrespected science, or, to be more exact, people representing faith have committed many crimes against people representing science. Up to now, faith and science have been like estranged brothers; they need to make up and shake hands in order to reach mutual understanding.

Without setting out to do so, science has forced believers to define more precisely what they believe in, thereby deepening their faith. And faith has made believing scientists more respectful of life and more humane. Atheist scientists are not better qualified; in fact, they are much less qualified to act in favor of human beings.

The world is made to be explored. The world's fertility and capacity for recovery are incalculable. Nature's prodigious yield speaks of the earth's fertility, and yet no one can quantify it. The world is ennobled and consecrated by being used; the virgin forest and the unimproved desert are a challenge for humanity. It is not a question of deflowering the world of its beauty, but of sanctifying it with the active presence of the human person. The world is beautiful for people, and is made beautiful by people for God.

God made the world for people, and people are not supposed to just admire it, but also to know it, explore it, experience it, utilize it and make good use of it. In the Bible, the task set to humanity is described with the word cultivate. People are expected to cultivate and take care of the earth. *Yahweh God took the man*

*and settled him in the Garden of Eden to cultivate and take care of it.* It follows that the opposite of this task is to destroy, mangle, neglect. With their neglect or care for things, people write a part of their history; they decide about the use of things, of life even, as long as that life belongs to an order that is lower than their own.

Gn. 2:15

What is natural for people is to be present in the world, and what is natural for the world is to for people to preside over it. Nature is not better for having developed spontaneously; natural processes should not be justified simply because they are natural, untouched by human reason. It is more in tune with God's plan for people to direct, channel or induce natural processes. What is natural for nature is to be directed and managed by people; this in no way profanes nature, rather it sanctifies it.

It is often believed that when the order of nature is not altered, it is somehow healthier or holier, as if it were not waiting for human intervention. But pure nature is wild, untamed, unfruitful, and alien. People, with their reason and their work, can sublimate nature and its processes, although it is also true that they can pervert them.

## Humanity of the World

The strength that humanity is acquiring demands a world of solidarity. We are rapidly approaching the moment when a SINGLE world will exist, with unified

goals, or else no world will exist (World War - total self-destruction).

When A. Einstein was asked whether he could imagine what the Third World War would be like, he answered, *I don't know, but what I do know is that the Fourth will be stone-throwing battle.*

The unity and fraternity of people, as a goal, presupposes the unity and paternity of God, as origin. The fraternity of people means nothing without the paternity of God. And the God of our origins asks us to tend toward unity.

The debate over polygenism and monogenism gave rise to a violent dispute in favor and against the Bible. If the author of Genesis had projected life only toward the past, he would have imagined a God who made clay figures- not just one figure, but many, and not all the same, some painted white and others black. This would have accounted better for his experience of a multi-racial world. But for the author of Genesis, who saw God as one and unique, the only creator, monogenism is a theological fact. Just as there is only one God, God creates only one humanity. People make up a single unit, a family; we are all descendants of that family.

1 Co. 15:22ff

Adam did not just represent all human beings; in a certain sense, he contained us, inasmuch as he was the seed of all of us. The hypothesis, or theory of scientific polygenism, does not affect the theological message of the unity of the human race.

We may feel disinclined to renounce our nationality in order to become citizens of the world, just as in the Middle Ages people felt disinclined to renounce their feudal manor in order to start building nations. But even though we are of the Earth and literally made of earth, our strongest ties should be with other people and not with the earth.

It will never be more than a historical convention that south of the Rio Grande is Mexico. It goes against nature for nature to be used to separate people; and the unity and integration of all people will always be a goal to reach for, an unreachable goal to be sure. Science, art, religion, technology, culture- all are an attempt to achieve solidarity. International law tries to transcend nations. Human rights, and in a certain sense, the international market, represent a rousing cheer in favor of unity.

Ease of communication has aroused people's interest in faraway places, making them feel more like world citizens.

The human family is one, and goods and values belong to everyone. Michelangelo's Pietà and all the treasures of the Vatican do not belong to the Vatican, but to the entire world. Bach's music does not belong to Bach; it belongs to anyone who enjoys listening to it. The Hebrew Bible does not belong to the Hebrews; it is a legacy for all people. When one person discovers a certain truth, that truth is for everyone. When a person is unfairly condemned, it is an affront to all people, and God himself is pained. Each person is like one grape in a whole cluster.

God's unity is the ultimate reason for the world's unity.

Jesus said:

*Father, may they be one in us,  
as you are in me and I am in you.* (Jn. 17:21)

When a bell is struck in one spot, all of its molecules vibrate and the whole world rings. When one person suffers, God notices and listens. If a songbird dies, a star feels pity. These are obviously not demonstrable facts; this is something more real and profound: the unity of the universe and God's care for it.

*Look at the birds in the sky.  
They do not sow  
or reap  
or gather into barns;  
yet your heavenly Father feeds them.  
Are you not worth much more than they are?*  
(Mt 6:26ff)

Anyone who contemplates birds and harvests and barns cannot help but feeling that the value of a person is greater than the value of these other things.

God's oneness does not refer only to a numerical fact. It is also God's power to unite all things and all people. It is God's power to unite all things to himself, especially people.

A person who is committed to others, feels compassion in the presence of suffering, feels shame in the presence of misery, weeps at the poverty of others. Killing a brother is presented in Scripture as one of

the most inhuman and degenerate acts possible, a shameful act that offends God. To Cain's cynical question: *Am I my brother's keeper?*, God's implicit answer is: *Of course. You are your brother's keeper, and the world's.*

Gn 4:9

A world made to a human scale is a world made to the scale of the universe, and of history itself, not just my own immediate world. People are not measured by their capacity to walk, to see or to possess; they have a capacity to give that is even bigger than the capacity of others to receive. They have the right to give their possessions, and their life, even though others do not have the right to ask them to. Bach's capacity to give, or Leonardo da Vinci's, or Erickson's, or Gandhi's, or the capacity of a simple farmwoman, or of any person, goes beyond their time, their ideas and their life. Of all beings, humans are the only ones who have the right to choose what or who they give their lives to.

People are measured not just by what they do in life, or what they make theirs, or what they have, but by what they give, especially when it has to do with giving life.

God's unity is expressed in his desire and care for the unity of the world. In God's eyes, the world is a single body, and Jesus is its head. An individual is not a citizen of a few square miles; she is a citizen of the whole world. When people are struggling with identity issues, they cling to exclusivity; the maturity of an adult creates the need to share. Nothing that is genuinely human should be foreign to a person, just as it is not foreign to God.

# 4

## The Human Person as Project

## The Human Person as Project

From the perspective of our way of doing things, we can say that in God there is a universal plan of salvation, a sort of project that brings order to the world and leads history toward a certain objective. The end can shed light on the meaning that history has from the beginning. The end is the first thing that people pursue and think about, like an Architect who makes a project or a scale model: the model determines, orders and regulates the means to reach the objectives. The end is the first thing people have in mind, and it is the last thing that is attained. God's project for people involves all of their being, their life and their history. Before people ever existed, God's plan for people existed.

God also has a plan and intervenes continuously in human history in general, and in each person's history in particular, but without trampling on people's freedom and responsibility. It is what Paul calls his *hidden wisdom*, his plan or purpose, and also *his own kind purposes*, defined beforehand and from all eternity.

God's plan is not something foreign to history. It is not a fatal destiny, nor is it disconnected from people's decisions and responsibilities. History is what comes out of God's plans and people's decisions.

Ep. 1:9ff  
2Tm 1:9  
Ep. 3:11; 1:4;  
2Th 2:13;  
Col 1:26;  
1Co. 2:7



The plan of salvation has to do with a unity that is not prefabricated, but discovered, and revealed. Everything points toward humanity. Scientifically speaking, the occurrence of life, prepared from the beginning, physically or biologically considered, forms a whole. Humanity has sprung up out of the world, and is homogenous with the world. It is also the crowning of all sciences. More and more is being discovered about humanity in paleontology, in geology, in biology, in zoology, in prehistory. In a sense, matter is prepared for life, and life for consciousness; consciousness in turn tends toward greater freedom, strives after more intelligence, more thought, more solidarity and more self-giving.

From matter to consciousness, freedom and solidarity, there are millions of years of distance. Everything is profoundly united, but their identities are not confused. Elements are still distinct, but united like the links of a chain. There is nothing inferior or worthy of scorn when everything tends toward life, consciousness, freedom unity, the human person.

The immense mass made up of all organic and inorganic beings reveals a natural and pre-expected organization. The wonderful variety of shapes that life takes in its lower orders is the expression of a whole, a project, that reaches its peak in the human person.

The world of humans, even more than the world of atoms, or the atmosphere or liquids, is made up of a set of correlations with inner coherence.

Since we cannot know or imagine the size of the universe, we cannot know the size of God's power and love either. We see everything from within our atmosphere, and when we venture outside of it, we need a special suit, in order to take a little bit of artificial atmosphere with us.

God is a God who exists and who gives, produces and maintains being. God is a living God who gives, produces and maintains life. God is a personal God who gives, produces and maintains persons, and establishes ties with them. The God of the biosphere is a rather uninteresting God, if he does not become the God of the personal universe; and the God of the person, freely accepted and loved, becomes the God of others.

## **The Human Person Pre-seen (Pre-vision)**

We can speak of God's omnipresence. This means that God is present everywhere, not like a spy, but in order to care for us. This is a divine attribute that works in our favor, not against us. It could really be seen as a characterization more of the human person than of God: the human person is, everywhere, the being that God looks after the most. God is aware everywhere of what happens to people. This is one of the most profound and genuine experiences of the Biblical mindset.

The most important thing is not that the people are thinking about God all the time, but that people are always on God's mind. This is why it is a good idea for people to put themselves in God's presence from time to time, in a conscious way, in order to feel God's presence in their life. The important thing is that people are always present to God, and it is good to know that. God's omnipresence refers to God's care not only in all places, but more importantly, at all times. The God of Israel has more to do with time than space. He is a God who is present in all of humanity's history, and in each individual's history. He is a faithful God. His faithfulness contrasts with people's fickleness, and expresses his desire to be always the same for people.

God sees life and history from the beginning to the end, which is why we can speak of God's pre-vision, or to be more exact, of the human person pre-seen by God, which means the human person dreamed of by God, expected by God. We can also say that the human person is the object of God's eternal and loving care, even before he exists. God's care is greater than that of a swallow preparing a nest for her chicks.

God's omnipresence and prevision apply to all people, especially to the neediest; God is particularly sensitive to whatever affects them. The human person in existential crisis: poor, humiliated, sinful, ill, is the first object of God's care- the same way a mother takes special care of her sick or helpless child.

## The Human Person Pre-loved (Pre-dilection)

God's prior knowledge is linked to his love, and the object of one and the other is the human person.

Things are foreseen in terms of the human person, because he is loved even before any response on his part is expected. This is the first message to Jeremiah: *Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you; before you came to birth, I consecrated you.* Knowledge, from the Biblical perspective, is not just an intellectual act; it is also a relationship based on benevolence and love.

Jr. 1:4  
Ho. 13:5;  
Am. 3:2;  
Ps. 1:6;  
1 Co. 8:3;  
Ga. 4:9

God's predilection for the human person does not result from any effort on that person's part; it is not a reward for good behavior. It is a gift given with nature, and it means that, all else aside, God is not indifferent to the human person.

The Bible bears unremitting witness to God's love for people, and it is a love that is often not returned. And the fundamental message of the kingdom proclaimed by Jesus is God's immeasurable love regardless of people's iniquity.

Lk. 15:11ff;  
Mt. 18:12-14

All of God's love goes out to all people, because they are all an essential and existential reference to Jesus. In him, they all form a single body, and are the object of the Father's love. The human person is a relative being, and his fundamental relationship is

with God in Jesus Christ. It is a relationship grounded in love. He relates to God as a father, and to others as brothers and sisters. The relationship is not just one of creature and Creator, or cause and effect; it is a relationship based on the Father's love that antedates his children.

1 Co. 15:47ff

Rm. 8:28ff

People, from the beginning, in the same way as Adam, have the status of signs; they are signs, and their meaning is Jesus of Nazareth. Human beings are signs, primarily for the Father, who sees the image of Jesus in each one. This is the ultimate reason people should try to see Jesus in others. Linked to Jesus, before time began, human beings were the object of God's love, which is why they experience life and love as a gift. But love antedates life. God loves, and because he loves, he gives life.

*Yes, you love all that exists, you hold nothing of what you have made in abhorrence,  
for had you hated anything, you would not have formed it.* (Ws. 11:24ff)

It is characteristic of God, of his love and grace, to antedate people. That is why people, before they can count on anything else, can count on God's love.

## **The Human Person Pre-chosen (Pre-election)**

God's prevision and predilection for people leads to pre-election. People are beings who in God's eyes and

heart are chosen or elected ahead of time, before the creation of the world, to reproduce the image of Jesus, to conform themselves to him, and thus participate through him in everything that God wants and can be for people. It is ultimately all about the love that makes people fully themselves, and that ties them to the love and glory of Jesus Christ, in such a way that they are the recipient of the same love and glory with which Jesus has been loved and glorified.

Jn. 17:24 and 26

God has chosen the human person; Israel is the chosen nation of God. The one chosen is the nation, the person, not God. And yet, God expects that at the appropriate time, the person will choose him, not as one among many, but as the object of her freely opting for the one God, in response to God's pre-election. God wants to be chosen, not just accepted. He wants to be the God of our conscious, responsible and free choice, which is why he expects a response in terms of commitment and covenant.

God's predilection and pre-election do not imply the idea of discrimination against others; the idea is to highlight God's love and not set up differences among people. Predilection is a term that establishes a tie between God and people, not a term to divide people. There is nothing in the person himself that makes him God's favorite, only God's predilection. The predilection is in God, not in the person.

In the New Testament, the first and last object of God's prevision, predilection, pre-election and providence is Jesus, and people inasmuch as they are essentially and existentially linked to him. The terms in which this relationship is expressed are always

Eph. 1:1-23  
Col. 1:13-20;  
Ga. 4:4;  
Rm. 8:28ff;  
Jn. 1:1ff; 20:30;  
Mk. 1:1ff;  
Lk. 3:23ff;  
Mt. 1:1-18.

Christ-centered; that is the way it is put in the Letter to the Ephesians, and in parallel passages.

When we are asked in Ps. 8:4 *What is man that you should spare a thought for him, the son of man that you should care for him?* the answer is given in the question itself: man is God's care and concern. People's value comes from the value of the care that God historically has shown for them. People are a crystallization of God's immeasurable solicitude.

## **God's Care for the Human Person (Pro-vidence)**

Divine Providence is not an impersonal attribute. Providence means nothing if it is not from someone and for someone. Providence is a characteristic of God in favor of people, and it refers to the affection and solicitude with which God takes care of people, especially the neediest.

Ultimately, Providence is God's solicitude for Jesus, through him and because of him, in favor of all people.

God's Providence for people has been revealed and renewed in the historic solicitude of the risen Jesus for his people.

Worldly goods, our health, life and well-being, are not the ultimate object of Jesus' solicitude. What he cares about most is our salvation, or fulfillment, and together with that, his greater glory. He seeks this and wants this definitely for our own good, because his glory consists of people's salvation, their progress and worldly well-being, because for people to be saved in the beyond, they must be saved here too. St. Irenaeus said that God's glory consisted of the comprehensive progress of the living person, and St. Thomas said: God seeks his glory not for himself but for us. St. Ignatius of Loyola said that God's glory was based on the greatest and most universal spiritual well-being of others. We could say that the greatest glory of God is to be found in the liberation and salvation of the neediest, of the person in crisis.

God's Providence and his care for people through the risen Jesus is not just a natural solicitude for those who lack a home, clothes and food. It is a saving providence, and therefore encompasses the human person in all aspects, without losing sight of Jesus, who orders our entire existence toward a communion of life with him. Jesus' Providence is the loving and sincere solicitude by which he orders all events and all things so that people attain their most complete fulfillment, freely and through his grace.

We could point out a kind of order in this divine solicitude. Spiritual values are sought before worldly values; people are seen to before things; community concerns take preference over individual issues. If there is a solicitude toward the vegetable kingdom, it is so the animal kingdom can subsist, and animals are there so that the human kingdom can exist, and



humans form the basis of communion with others and God.

Jesus asked his followers to have absolute trust in God, like the trust of a child in his Father's arms. He pointedly taught that the God who cares for the lilies of the field and the birds of the sky, takes infinitely greater care of the person in need. People who are weighed down with life's worries and care only about worldly goods, are not in tune with the Gospel. People who follow Jesus must trust in the Father's care and faithfulness, much more than in the care and concern they can have for themselves.

Mt. 6:25ff;  
Lk. 12:22-31;  
Mt. 7:7-11

For the early Christians, God's care for his people and their salvation was distilled in the presence of Jesus of Nazareth, and in the many ways in which he appeared to the apostles and disciples after his death, not only to reassure them but also to create in them new ways of believing, hoping and loving; new ways to look at the world and others; a new horizon and a new vocation and destiny.

Lk. 24:13ff;  
Jn. 20:1ff

Reasons are not the only thing that should compel us to entrust our future to Jesus; the experience of our past and present should also move us. Ours is a history of innumerable examples of providence from him who created and redeemed us, who sustains us and leads us toward our most complete fulfillment.

Our life should be marked with the sign of trust in Jesus. Just as we were formed by his hand and bear his imprint, and are sustained by his hand even now, in the same way we should entrust our past to him, no matter how dark it is, as well as our future, no matter

how uncertain. This trust is justified by his love, his faithfulness and his solicitude, not our merits.

Jesus' continuous activity in the world is shown to people in the fact that he does not just care for them, but also invites them to cooperate lovingly in his own solicitude toward others. A father's care for his children, and a mother's solicitude for the fruit of her womb, are ways to participate, perhaps unconsciously, in Jesus' intimate providence. He invites us insistently, and the Gospel presents it as an out-and-out demand: to concern ourselves consciously, freely and lovingly for the needy. Our commitment to him and our will to follow him imply a commitment to people in crisis. By sharing his saving mission with us, Jesus makes us participants of his solicitude, and in him and by him, we participate in the solicitude of the Father who sent him, and in the solicitude of the Spirit that he gave us and that moves our heart.

1 Jn. 2:1-4; 4:10

Mt. 25:53;  
Lk. 10:29ff

1 Jn. 3:17;  
Jm. 2:1ff

# 5 The Human Person Divided

## **The Human Person against Himself**

People are divided beings. In the depths of their broken heart, they feel as if they were not whole. They experience contradiction within themselves. Their life comprises death. They tend toward controversy, not reconciliation; disbelief, not faith; mistrust, not a free giving of themselves. They sometimes find reasons not to believe, to deceive themselves and others, and at other times they find just as many compelling reasons to do the opposite. Their reference to God often turns into idolatry. Their vocation for veneration becomes self-worship.

People feel their inner division when they have to reconcile earthly and eternal considerations, relative things and absolute values, myself and yourself, freedom and obedience, the desire to have and the call to give.

They are disproportionate beings, and as a result, they take a certain pleasure in disproportion; they are discordant beings, so they have an inclination to distortion; they are warlike, and therefore they make

war. There are times when the essence of humanity seems to be contradiction more than anything else. They are rational beings, and yet many of their acts are unreasonable. Given people's contradiction and incoherence, it would not be logical to expect them to act in a coherent way.

Between what ought to be and what actually exists, there is tremendous tension with destructive potential. One of the things that people find most difficult is accepting themselves.

Between what they would like to make of themselves and what they actually do, there is a discouraging gap. Disillusioned, they realize that world is not as it ought to be, and other people are not either, but they have no right to be indignant because they themselves also come up short. Humans are the only beings who are aware of their own misfortune. And even when they know that they are made in the image and likeness of God in Jesus Christ, and called to resemble him more and more, they often feel that they are heading in the wrong direction and that their life is unfolding as a process of disfigurement. Instead of integrating their strengths and values, they are torn apart. There is a process of decay, something rotten inside of them.

It is impossible to be optimistic when one discovers certain aspects of life, or looks deeply into the recesses of the human heart. Faith and hope can barely remain standing in the face of Auschwitz or Hiroshima, or New York, or our own home. Evil has intruded into our living space and into our heart.

The problem with people is people, and their heart. To be more precise, we can say that the division of the human person is the division of her heart. When people hurt themselves and others, the trouble starts in their heart.

Almost all people who are honest with themselves, cannot help but feeling pessimistic when they look into their own conscience.

*As in water face answers to face,  
so the mind of man reflects the man.*

(Pr. 27:19)

The last judgment might very well consist of God making people sincere so that they, ultimately, judge their own life.

The division of the human person is expressed by St. Paul and St. John with the flesh-spirit antithesis. In this case, flesh has a pejorative connotation: it refers to the sin that people bear inside, and represents something like the instrument of sin. Sinful flesh means existence without God, and therefore, sin.

Rm. 8:4-10;  
Mk. 14:38  
Rm. 8:3; 6:6  
and 7:24

In John, the opposition is presented as two worlds that collide; he uses the light-darkness antithesis. From the perspective of salvation, St. Paul establishes an opposition between the old man and the new. The old man is inclined toward sin, while the new man is called to live in accordance with salvation.

St. Paul makes people's internal struggle a personal matter when he writes:

*I cannot understand my own behavior.  
I fail to carry out the things I want to do,  
and I find myself doing the very things I hate.  
When I act against my own will,  
that means I have a self that acknowledges that the  
Law is good,  
and so the thing behaving in that way is not my self  
but sin living in me.  
The fact is, I know of nothing good living in me  
-living, that is, in my unspiritual self-  
for though the will to do what is good is in me,  
the performance is not,  
with the result that instead of doing the good things I  
want to do,  
I carry out the sinful things that I do not want.  
When I act against my own will, then,  
it is not my true self doing it,  
but sin which lives in me.  
In fact, this seems to be the rule,  
that every single time I want to do good,  
it is something evil that comes to hand.  
In my inmost self I dearly love God's Law,  
but I can see that my body follows a different law  
that battles against the law which my reason dictates.  
This is what makes me a prisoner of that law of sin  
which lives inside my body.  
What a wretched man I am!  
Who will rescue me from this body doomed to death?  
Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ or Lord!  
In short, it is I who with my reason serve the Law of  
God,  
and no less I who serve in my unspiritual self the law  
of sin.*

(Rm. 7:15-25)

## **Sin against the Human Person**

Living means not only being here and now, doing this or that; living is not the same as existing. Living means being a problem for ourselves; it means finding ourselves in a dilemma, facing an alternative, and deciding on an answer. Each one of our acts is a response to the question that our life poses.

Each person is, for herself, the overriding and fundamental problem of her whole existence. Life should be considered as a whole and not a series of isolated incidents. It is the overall orientation of life as a whole that gives meaning to each one of a person's acts. The meaning of life is what makes an isolated incident meaningful. This does not mean that isolated incidents never have value in and of themselves, but in addition to their intrinsic value, they contain an echo of the person's life as a whole. Each incident is inscribed in a life context in which it must be read. Life is a succession of times, a continuum, not an accumulation of juxtaposed events. The meaning of life is projected in each one of the events; and each one adds to, or takes from, the harmony of life.

What people do when they go against themselves or others is called sin in the Scriptures.



Sins like hatred, injustice, making use of people, killing, would not be such a poison if they did not find such resonance and evoke such an avid response in people. Sin would be something outside of us, like an accident or a misfortune. But unfortunately, that is not the case. Sin, war, evil, error- they are all inside of people. Temptation would be a fleeting thought if it did not resonate so deeply with people. Sin is sin only because people identify with it.

God's will consists of people's fulfillment, which is why sin offends both people and God. Sin is the negation or destruction of the self, of others, and of God. Sin destroys people in their relationships; it never fulfills them.

Sin is not a violation of an arbitrary law. It is better understood as opting for what is negative, or a kind of stumbling. To sin means to oppose or imperil another person's fulfillment, or one's own. Sin is a person's self-destruction, a contamination of the world, and a historical tragedy. Sin is what people do when they set themselves up against God, against others or against themselves. Sin is in people, not in things.

Good and evil, grace and sin, are not just two options; more fundamentally, they are two orientations, like magnetic poles that pull at life. Goodness and evil are two cavities in the human heart. It might seem that the experience of personal guilt is something inextricably linked to human life. It could be said that people commit sin because they are sin. But the experience of grace is also inextricably linked to human life; it belongs to human experience even more than sin, because we are more closely linked to Jesus in

grace and life, than to Adam in sin and death. Thus the human person, more than sin, is grace.

The sense of guilt derives from freedom, when it becomes evident that the evil could have been avoided. Guilt withers people's feelings, and even their idea of God. The most fateful thing about guilt is that people can get used to it. When they commit a fault, and then repeat it a number of times, it no longer seems like a fault. It is like a drug that alienates people or numbs them. In their iniquity, they can fall into an abyss, and then can stop feeling distress over their fall. They can settle down into their sin.

Both the Old Testament and the New affirm that sin is not just worshipping false gods, but also injustice, hardness of heart, and the exploitation of one's neighbor. It is a lack of love. Sin that is exclusively against God does not exist. Sin goes against the person who commits it, and against others, and that is why it can be said to go against God. People cannot really fight God. Fighting God is just an image used to refer to people's opposition.

Only in Jesus can we say that sin has been committed directly against God, because it is in him that the greatest rejection of God's greatest gift occurs, that gift being Jesus himself. In this sense, sin is committed against God and against a world that he has blessed with the History of Salvation. Jesus died, because people kill. God was abandoned; the prophets were murdered; Jesus was crucified. The death on the cross epitomizes the way all people from all times have rejected Jesus.

Rm. 5:12-21

Having a weak  
idea of sin forms  
part of our sinfulness.  
Kierkegaard

Gn. 32:23

Heb. 10:26-31ff

In a certain sense, sin continues to be committed against Christ inasmuch as he wants to join us to himself and live in us. Any sin against our brothers and sisters or against ourselves, is a sin against Christ who makes himself present in others and in us. For this same reason, any sin against Christ is a sin against God, who has made himself present and accessible to us.

Death means the definitive end. The rejection of Christ took the form of death, because he was denied total access to the reality of our existence. But it was the Father who had the last word: he raised him to life, for himself, for creation, and for each and every human person.

## **The Thoughts of the Heart**

Rm. 1:18ff

To a Hebrew, all things are good because they come from God. Creation and the goodness of the universe go together. Evil is seen as coming from outside. Since evil is not really a positive thing, it needs no author or cause. It is a negative thing, better understood as the absence of good and ultimately, the absence of God. Evil can be interpreted as what is missing of God in people and in the world.

The Hebrew mindset is not dualist; there are no things that are good or bad in themselves. There is not

a God of good and a God of evil, a good God and an evil God. Everything comes from the one true God, and thus everything is one, good, holy and true, which are the qualities of all being. Evil comes from an inauthentic, unjust and disordered relationship on the part of people.

A Hebrew's train of thought would be as follows:

- A) Just as God, who is creator,
- B) gives rise to all things, which are good;
  - a) so people, who are falsifiers,
  - b) give rise to all evil realities,
    - which are like thoughts.
- A) Just as the source of good is in God's heart,
- B) and in that which he makes through his Spirit;
  - a) so the source of evil is in people's hearts,
  - b) and in their evil inclinations.

Goodness is to be found in created, concrete things. Evil is located somewhere else, as if it were something foreign, and even unreal somehow. It is what creation is missing in order to be good; it is like a lack of reality, like a lie, like disobedience, like an absence of God.

Evil comes from people's heart and their inner division; it is the absence of God in people's heart, and it shows up in what people do. It is true that the evil that people do, as evil, is not something positive. If we feel that we must give it a concrete and visual form as something real and negative, its author will always be human people, never God.

*The things that come out of the mouth come from the heart,*

*and it is these that make a man unclean.  
For from the heart come evil intentions:  
murder, adultery, fornication,  
theft, perjury, slander.* (Mt. 15:18-19)

*For it is from within, from men's hearts,  
that evil intentions emerge...* (Mk. 7:21)

Evil begins with the thoughts of the heart; to the Hebrew way of thinking, the source of evil is to be found in people's heart, in their inner self, in their falseness, and in their divided being.

*The sin of Judah is written with an iron pen,  
engraved with a diamond point on the tablet of their  
heart.* (Jr. 17:1)

1Co. 7:37;  
2Co. 9:7;  
Mt. 22:37;  
Dt. 6:5

The heart is the focal point of decisive options; that is why *loving God with all your heart* means loving him with the utmost personal authenticity and integrity. The totality of the person is the response to the oneness of God.

Conversion and the origin of good begin in people's heart.

*But now, now it is God who speaks-  
come back to me with all your heart,  
fasting, weeping, mourning.  
Let your hearts be broken, not your garments torn,  
turn to Yahweh your God again,  
for he is all tenderness and compassion,  
slow to anger, rich in graciousness,  
and ready to relent.* (Jl. 2:12-13)

A repentant heart, determined to do good, is a treasure of God on earth.

The heart is a person's consciousness, and the devil can enter there, or uproot the word that the Lord has planted there. The heart is the person's deepest self.

*Do not dress up for show:  
doing up your hair, wearing gold bracelets and fine  
clothes;  
all this should be inside, in a person's heart, imperish-  
able:  
the ornament of a sweet and gentle disposition-  
this is what is precious in the sight of God. (1P. 3:3-4)*

This is why the Lord promises everlasting happiness in a direct relationship with God to the pure of heart. The heart also conceals the destiny or secret of life.

*More than all else, keep watch over your heart,  
since here are the wellsprings of life. (Pr. 4:23)*

Jesus is the model for all people to follow when Matthew has him making the exhortation:

*Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart,  
and you will find rest for your souls. (Mt. 11:29)*

## The Human Person as Sin

People do not run gracefully through life as other creatures do. Their existence is full of missteps. We could say that they are the only creatures that disappoint others, Jesus, God, themselves. When they look at their own life unflinchingly, they find moments when they cannot feel very optimistic. They come to experience their person as made not of earth but of dung: that they are tainted or fractured from within, and from the beginning. They feel inclined to equate sin with people, and at certain times it is hard for them to distinguish between what they are and what they do: they become what they do, and if they do evil, they becomes evil.

In history and in practice, it has always been hard to distinguish between sin and people. Thus it often came to pass that in order to condemn sin, people were burned. Or conversely, in order not to reject people, their sin was accepted, and this acceptance implied solidarity with their injustices. It is true that what people do, which is often evil, compromises them and qualifies them personally.

Rot seems to become the permanent state of people's hearts, turned rotten by evil.

*The hearts of men are full of malice;  
they practice extravagance toward the living in their*

*lifetime,  
and to the dead thereafter.* (Qo. 9:3)

*The heart is more devious than any other thing,  
perverse, too: who can pierce its secrets?* (Jr. 17:9)

Evil can almost seem to be part of people's nature.

*You know I was born guilty,  
a sinner from the moment of conception.* (Ps. 51:5)

So it is not just our experience or history that tells us that people are base by nature, it is part of God's revealed message. Translated into more familiar language, this means that there is something fundamentally wrong with people. Redemption speaks of the goodness of the redeeming God, but also of the depravity of people, who need to be redeemed.

Rm. 5:12

Rm. 3:10-18ff

Good and evil, grace and sin are things that characterize human beings, specifically in the contradiction of the concepts- in the ongoing war between good and evil, when good often comes in the guise of evil, and vice versa. It becomes necessary to analyze and diagnose: good appears with the symptoms of evil, and sin looks like goodness. People carry within themselves both truth and falsehood: even with the best of intentions, their words are often neither true nor false. Good and evil, truth and error are not found in an isolated, chemically pure state.

Scripture says:

*What race deserves honor? The human race.*

*What race deserves contempt? The human race.*

*What race deserves honor? Those who fear the Lord.*



*What race deserves contempt? Those who break the commandments.* (Si. 10:19)

Jn. 2:24-25

Jesus' optimism and love for people do not make him naive about their wickedness. Jesus is the first to believe in people and their possibilities, and yet during his lifetime he does not trust them, because he knows what they have in their hearts.

Jesus knows that all people are flawed.

*If you then, who are evil,  
know how to give your children what is good,  
how much more will the heavenly Father  
give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!* (Lk. 11:13)

Jesus knows that hardness of heart is something that characterizes people, just as in the Old Testament. He even reveals human evil as a legacy passed down from our ancestors.

Mt. 23:31  
Lk. 13:34

*You are the sons of those who murdered the prophets!  
Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you that kill the prophets!*

*Can you name a single prophet your ancestors never  
persecuted?  
In the past they killed those who foretold the coming  
of the Just One, and now you have become his  
betrayers, his murderers.* (Ac. 7:52)

Mt. 21:23ff

This spiral of crime is described by the Evangelist in the parable of the wicked husbandmen.

Jesus suffers like no one else the injustice and hardness of the human heart. Although he took it upon

himself to care for the sick and looked for ways to cure their soul, the struggle against evil is still an issue. Jesus struggled to free people, but people are still oppressed. He gave his life to put an end to injustice, and injustice is still there. The transformation of the world is an unfinished task.

Just as we find in the Bible the most sublime insights into human existence, we also find the most grievous sentences: *Yahweh regretted having made man on the earth, and his heart grieved.*

Gn. 6:5-7

It is important for people to recognize the evil of their heart, but it is even more important to know that they are no less the object of God's love and that he can transform them from within; that God cannot turn a blind eye to the heart's evil without truly justifying it. When God forgives a sin, he wipes it away, but he does not pretend it never happened. Maybe that is why God regretted his regret and offered his peace for all time.

Gn. 8:21 and 22

Yahweh said in his heart:  
*Never again will I curse the earth  
because of man,  
because his heart  
contrives evil from his infancy.* (Gn. 8:21)

*I set my bow in the clouds,  
and it shall be a sign of the Covenant between me and  
the earth.  
When I gather the clouds over the earth,  
and the bow appears in the clouds,  
I will recall the Covenant between myself and you and  
every living creature of every kind.*

*And so the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all things of flesh.  
When the bow is in the clouds I shall see it  
and call to mind the lasting Covenant.* (Gn. 9:13-17)

The God of Israel is a God of peace, who makes peace with people and wants people to make peace. The flaw that marks people is the absence of God. People need God because they are sin. This is why the encounter with God begins with the awareness that the real problem is people. Nothing and nobody in this world can offer people complete salvation, because sin is the absence of, or the need for God. It is up to him to make himself present and enter into communion with people to save them.

## **The Human Person against Others**

Evil does not remain inside people; it comes out of their heart like wasps from a hive. People do not settle for doing harm just to themselves. They turn against others in a fight to the death, often not so much to save themselves as to destroy the others. They want to be on the top, even if it means making a pyramid of other people. They want to have more than others, even if it means that others are starving. They want to live better than others, even if it means sucking others dry. They assume that the existence of others somehow threatens their life.

Amos comes to the defense of those who always end up on the losing side:

*For the three crimes, the four crimes, of Israel  
I have made my decree and will not relent:  
because they have sold the virtuous man for silver  
and the poor man for a pair of sandals,  
because they trample on the heads of ordinary people  
and push the poor out of their path.* (Am. 2:6-7)

His words are no less stinging when he addresses rich and powerful women:

*Listen to this word, you cows of Bashan  
living in the mountains of Samaria,  
oppressing the needy, crushing the poor.* (Am. 4:1)

The exploitation of the poor is a prolonged martyrdom; it is an undeclared war, relentless and unjust.

The life of the human community is ongoing social injustice. When hostilities stop, indifference begins. Day after day the paths of friendship are wiped out; human fraternity appears as a utopia. Friendship is sacrificed to the desire for possessions and domination. In almost all relationships there is a tyrant and a slave.

It is hard to deny that dark colors predominate, and fill most of the picture. People are always being used by others: the poor by the rich and by ideological opportunists, workers by management, children by their elders, the minority by the majority. Even in democracy there is a certain degree of injustice. It

seems that all institutions have a part in perpetuating the oppression of one group of people by another.

As a rule, those who are good at exploiting are also good at justifying their acts, while the exploited lack the means to defend their cause. Those who neither exploit nor are exploited are usually willing to fight only when their own personal interests are at stake. The most generalized sin is insensitivity to the crimes that are occurring all around us.

There is an evil that most people forgive and justify, and that almost all of us are guilty of: indifference, and injustice. Indifference to evil does more harm than the evil itself. It is a more universal, contagious and dangerous plague. Silent justification turns exceptional or opportunistic evil into the rule of the game, and invites it to settle down among us for good.

When everyone commits evil, it seems banal, but the truth is that evil is greater when it is widely accepted.

Injustice can be magnified when it is hidden beneath the cloak of righteousness or religious justifications. A religious act tainted with injustice is an abomination to God.

*Look, you do business on your fast days,  
you oppress all your workmen;  
look, you quarrel and squabble when you fast  
and strike the poor man with your fist.  
Fasting like yours today  
will never make your voice heard on high.  
Is that the sort of fast that pleases me,*

*a truly penitential day for men?  
The sort of fast that pleases me...  
is to break unjust fetters  
and undo the things of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and break every yoke,  
to share your bread with the hungry,  
and shelter the homeless poor,  
to clothe the man you see to be naked  
and not to turn from your own kin.  
Then will your light shine like the dawn  
and your wound be quickly healed over.  
Your integrity will go before you,  
and the glory of Yahweh behind you.  
Cry, and Yahweh will answer;  
call, and he will say, "I am here."  
If you do away with the yoke,  
the clenched fist, the wicked word,  
if you give your bread to the hungry,  
and relief to the oppressed,  
your light will rise in the darkness,  
and your shadows become like noon.  
Yahweh will always guide you...* (Is. 58:4-11)

To the injustice of everyday life is often added publicly proclaimed injustice. The Roman circus reminds us not only of ancient brutality, when people took pleasure in watching the pain and destruction of their fellow man, but also of the brutality of modern-day Coliseums. Hitler is not just the personification of the evil implicit in the world; his anti-Semitism and atheism are also a phenomenon rooted in a particular period of history. Where there is atheism, Hitler is revived, to a greater or lesser degree.

Gn 18:19

Abraham was chosen by God from the beginning to act in accordance with justice and law, also to teach his descendants to do the same, and to see them grow in number and holiness. But people's hearts seem to be rotten from the start, and the simplest or most complex reasons serve as a pretext to wage war; they even make it sacred. The life of the human race contains the seeds of suicide, murder and war.

Even in everyday life, people suffer on account of the good, truth or virtue they find in others. Instinctively they want to be served, and not serve. They easily forget an offense when they are the ones to proffer it at someone else's expense. Hobbes believed he had captured the essence of the human race when he wrote that man is a wolf to other men. And pessimism can only grow when we contemplate the concentration camps at Auschwitz and Treblinka, and we recall the massacres, or the atomic bomb, or the guerilla warfare in communities that think that rebellion will bring peace. Children and nations study how to wage war, but they never study how to wage peace. What people should do in the face of immanent war, either large-scale or small-scale, is avoid it.

## **Conversion, Reconciliation, Regeneration**

People do not have a fixed path to follow, like a river, and they can also turn back, something a river can

never do. While they live, their fate is not cut in stone, which is cause for hope. People are not one-dimensional, and therefore cannot be summed up with a single word, or a single action. People can always correct their direction, change their plans. Only their whole life can sum them up.

The prophets did not think that everything was fixed ahead of time and that people had no choice but to submit to the designs of the gods. That was a pagan mentality that had nothing to do with Biblical faith. Fatalist determinism was the mindset that Sophocles used to frame the Greek tragedies, which so many people have found so compelling. In the Bible, however, God is not a dictator of fate; on the contrary, he is people's most valuable ally for reaching their goals. The prophets are not deterministic. They preach with the hope of conversion. History is something that is constructed as it unfolds; it is not prefabricated, or predetermined. God chooses people to do his will lovingly, not to take away their freedom. In the New Testament, people are elected only to do good and to attain eternal happiness. What kind of father could ever choose one of his children for failure, or for an accident?

*God chose us from the beginning to be saved, writes Paul to the Thessalonians, not to experience retribution, but to win salvation.*

2Th 2:13;  
1Th 5:9-11

N.B. Predestination for evil or frustration does not exist. It was a problem that was poorly stated, and therefore, poorly solved. Inadmissible premises were set which led to skewed conclusions. We all know that the solution to a problem depends on the terms in which it is stated.



God's knowledge of history and the freedom he gives people to construct it are complementary, not contradictory realities.

The Scriptures state, in the first place, that God knows human beings, and what they do; but that does not mean that God's knowledge determines what people will do. God knows reality and events as effects of human freedom. Knowing the randomness of history is an action by God that is completely different from what might be implied by knowing the inanimate nature of things. God does not know things in a way that determines history. God's knowledge does not decide history. His knowledge does not make things happen. God knows all the possibilities people can choose from in history, but his knowledge is not efficient, it does not make things exist. His Word is efficient because it expresses his will.

In the interpretation of texts that refer to a vocation given by God, such as Rm. 9:11-13, it is important to consider that history, events and hagiographers, with their particular ways of thinking, are real authors. This means that the Scriptures are not exclusively the Word of God; they come to be God's Word but do not cease to be the word of human beings. The Bible, even though it does presuppose a certain way of thinking, is not a book of metaphysics; it is a descriptive book that conveys a way of seeing and interpreting life and history. The Bible is not a manual of concepts, but rather a way of valuing and contemplating human life.

People in Scripture may realize that their days are numbered, that their name is written in the book of life, but they also know that God is always awaiting their response. No one has ever taken people more seriously than God. People are nobody's plaything, not even God's.

People always have the right to speak and pray; to speak to God one to one, because God has always spoken to them that way, and because they can always return to God. In fact, God is waiting for them to return. So people can change not only their way of

St. 17:1-2  
Rv. 3:5; 20:12

acting, but also their way of being. God expects people to improve themselves.

In the Bible people are responsible for their words and their actions. They are responsible not only for what they do, but also for what they become; in a certain sense they are responsible for the future, inasmuch as it depends on the present.

The prophet Jeremiah recognizes that, even in the act of returning to God, it is God who moves the individual.

*Make us come back to you, Yahweh,  
and we will come back...* (Lm. 5:21)

In Chapter 31, Jeremiah says:

*You have disciplined me, I accepted the discipline,  
like a young bull untamed.  
Bring me back, let me come back,  
for you are Yahweh my God.  
Yes, I turned away, but have since repented;  
I understood, I beat my breast,  
I was deeply ashamed, covered with confusion...*  
(Jr. 31:18-19)

Before God, people always have the right to change. Although God straightens people's paths, he directs them from within and respects their freedom:

*Do not say, "The Lord was responsible for my sinning,"  
for he is never the cause of what he hates.  
Do not say, "It was he who led me astray,"  
for he has no use for a sinner.*

*The Lord hates all that is foul,  
and no one who fears him will love it either.  
He himself made man in the beginning,  
and then left him free to make his own decisions.  
If you wish, you can keep the commandments,  
to behave faithfully is within your power.  
He has set fire and water before you;  
put out your hand to whichever you prefer.  
Man has life and death before him;  
whichever a man likes better will be given to him...  
He has never commanded anyone to be godless,  
he has given no one permission to sin. (Qo. 15:11-20)*

Mt. 18:22

Guilt, error and failure are not the last word. Guilt is not a life sentence; there is always a way out of it: repentance and returning to God. If God has commanded us to forgive seventy times seven, it is because he is willing to forgive indefinitely, provided there is at least some sincerity.

People are the only creatures that can oppose themselves, overcome their conditions, swim against the current, and dream of a better world and a new humanity. People are the only creatures that are not totally identified with what they do, which is why they can ask for forgiveness, repent and change their direction. Jeremiah recognized the need for God's help and said:

*Well you know, Yahweh,  
the course of man is not in his control,  
nor is it in man's power as he goes his way to guide his  
steps.*

*Correct us, Yahweh, gently,*

*not in your anger or you will reduce us to nothing.*

(Jr. 10:23-24)

People's hearts are like a plowed and fertilized field, full of seeds, of truth and error, of good and evil. People are the cultivators of their own heart. Truth and error, good and evil are not only discovered, they are also cultivated.

To convert means to define oneself; it means to take a stance and decide for good or for evil in one's heart. You are responsible forever for the fruit that you cultivate. In the world there are enemies, there are circumstances and situations, there are conditions and structures that hinder your fulfillment and happiness. There are attitudes in the heart that give rise to suicide, murder, war and exploitation. From the beginning, people choose the path they want to walk.

All people are sinners or saints at some point, but some have decided to side with evil or with holiness in their own heart, and forever. It makes no sense to plant noble sentiments in one's heart and then uproot them the next day; that would be the same as doing nothing; in fact, it would be worse than a waste of time. Not cultivating the seedling is the same as letting the weeds grow.

You should persevere in cultivating the good for the sake of your own fulfillment, or else you will necessarily go down the path of evil toward your own frustration. Because the evil that you commit often ends up looking to you like virtue.

Mt. 13:3-30;  
Mk. 4:3-9

Jesus compared people to a field where a variety of crops can be grown: assuming that the crop is question is goodness, the field can yield an abundant harvest, a poor harvest, or no harvest at all. Jesus spoke of people as responsible for their own harvest.

People in the Bible are never doomed, there is always room for hope. The nation of Israel lives on hope, as does the Church. All is not lost, because there is faith in Someone who is above all things God, who always leaves room for hope and who, while appearing to be silent, reserves as his divine prerogative the right to have the last word. It is not up to people, but to God, to pronounce the definitive sentence. If the last word were people's, God would cease being God and people, people; and the world would not have much of a future.

Humans are expectant beings, who live on hope, who can endure the unimaginable because they hope against all human hope. People are characterized by having faith, along with hope and a desire to change.

Conversion was one of the prophets' core messages. It consisted of turning away from evil, being faithful to the covenant and going back to Yahweh. Even for John the Baptist, conversion had a moral sense to it. What moved people to conversion was God's displeasure and the fear of future punishment. God was seen as a living being who was affected by people's life and behavior. He was like a judge who was fully informed about everything. Fear of God moved people to convert. The prophets preached a conversion grounded in sorrow, fear, repentance, pain and confusion. Penitence was its visible sign.

Jesus also preaches conversion. And he insists that people make a fundamental decision. He demands a different way of acting in the world, a different attitude toward others, especially the needy. He conveys a different way of understanding oneself and of thinking about God; he says that salvation does not come from the formal compliance of the law. Mutual love, understanding, service and generosity are what Jesus is aiming at with the new attitudes he tries to instill. He announces conversion not as a time of wrath, but as a moment of grace and forgiveness. He says that the love of God who seeks us out is what should move us to conversion. Conversion is a demand of love, not the fruit of fear. God is more of a father than a judge. Jesus does not propose just a change of behavior, but a more fundamental change of being, in people's hearts. He does not look only at the effects. The conversion that Jesus calls us to is a conversion of the heart, which means of the whole person.

Mt. 3:2ff

Mt. 5:42;  
Mk. 10:42-45;  
Lk. 22:24-27;  
Mt. 25:31ff

The conversion that Jesus preaches is not an act of common sense, or self-improvement. It involves letting oneself be overwhelmed by grace and returning to God and others.

The characteristic trait of the conversions that Jesus calls us to is not heroism, or hope in a future reward, or an urgent need. It is the joy of the kingdom now, the recognition of the experience of forgiveness and, above all, the possibility of communing with Jesus in others and of being like him.

In the apostolic preaching, conversion means making Jesus the center of one's life and following him. No one can convert without following Jesus

Ac. 2:36

somehow. Conversion is intimately linked to faith in Jesus who was crucified, but whom God has raised, placed at his right hand, and made *Lord and Messiah*. Conversion means believing that Jesus is the Savior and salvation itself.

*If your lips confess that Jesus is Lord  
and if you believe in your heart  
that God raised him from the dead,  
then you will be saved.*

*By believing from the heart  
you are made righteous;  
by confessing with your lips  
you are saved.*

(Rm. 10:9-10)

Becoming a Christian is not a change of opinion or a new ethical awareness; it is a new and personal relationship with Christ and with others that should be reflected in a change of life.

Conversion does not just mean turning away from evil, but from everything that keeps us from following Jesus creatively, because each person has to find his own way.

If God is to save a person, it is not enough for that person to believe in God; she must also believe in others. Faith in God is necessary for an authentic faith in other people, in their value and meaning. And if God is to reach out to people, people have to reach out to others. Returning to God means returning to Jesus, and returning to Jesus implies returning to others. What sums up a person is no less than her whole life. Conversion for the Apostles means focusing one's whole life, in an attitude of faith, hope, love and service, on Jesus and on others.

## Eternal Frustration

Eternal frustration is the corresponding negative counterpart to what we call eternal fulfillment.

It is important to point out that we are not talking about something positive. Hell is not a positive thing, just as sin is not a positive thing. Thus it does not imply a positive action by God the creator. God did not create hell. Hell exists because of what people do, the same as sin.

People create eternal frustration when they hate, when they murder, when they exploit others, when they turn their back on those who need them or when they set themselves up as the center of their life. Hell is not God's creation; people made it. There are selfish people in the world; that is why hell exists. Paul Claudel said, *Hell does not come from God; it comes from an obstacle that people set up against God.* People's transcendence is shown up in evil just as it is in holiness, and their acts are perpetually meaningful in both their positive and negative dimensions. This is why people, even though they are small and insignificant creatures, can enclose themselves in an absolutely closed and definitive circle. Hell is the hardening of people in evil. It is a state people put themselves in, not a place where they are thrown. And it is eternal, because it involves someone who gives



such a definitive no that he no longer can or will say yes.

Hell is not God's revenge, but his fidelity to people's responsibility. Hell is the most profound inner manifestation of what it means to reject God's love, as experienced by the person who has rejected it. Hell is God himself with all his power and majesty for people who have opted against him; it is eternal because it grows out of a definitive choice, and its existence begins the moment the fundamental choice against God is taken.

God's only will, even toward those who are lost, is to be love that gives eternal happiness. People's eternal frustration is a revelation, a manifestation of God who does want to be hell for anyone, but who must respect those who would be hell for themselves by choosing against God in his creatures. In hell, faith is imposed as a torment. It is impossible to be unbelieving there, because faith has become negative proof.

Hell is people themselves, eternally frustrated by their own doing. It is all of creation for those who have chosen to turn against God and all things. People who crash are injured by the very same car they are driving; likewise, those who hurl themselves against God crash into all of creation and injure themselves. Part of the reality of living people is the possibility of failing in their chosen project; this is an aspect of the transcendent dimension of human responsibility.

Mk. 9:43;  
Mt 18:8; 25:41;

The Bible uses a variety of images to describe this state: fire that cannot be put out, a furnace, a fiery lake of burning sulfur. These images speak to the Hebrew

reader of all that is painful and destructive in the world. They refer to the situation of those who have turned their backs definitively on their fundamental project and their communion with God. The wailing and gnashing of teeth mentioned in the Bible are figures and metaphors to describe the human situation of impotent and useless rebellion. The darkness outside contrasts with the light that shines on all those who are inside the father's house. The corrupting worm refers to people's inner frustration. Saint John talks of heaven as eternal life, and hell as death. If God is life and love, the absence of God is death and hatred.

*Hell is the natural fruit of sin.  
The way of the wicked is doomed.* (Ps. 1:6)

Sin punishes itself. Sin brings with it eternal death; it is the cause of death. It is not so much the darkness that will cause torment; those who are lost will become insufferable to themselves.

*But you, you are all setting light to a fire,  
and fanning embers.  
Then in with you to the flames of your fire,  
to the embers that you are lighting.  
So will my hand deal with you  
and you shall lie down in torments.* (Is. 50:11)

*The wicked man is snared in his own misdeeds,  
is caught in the meshes of his own sin.  
For want of discipline, he dies,  
and is lost through his own excessive folly.* (Pr. 5:22-23)

Lk. 3:17;  
Heb. 10:27;  
Mt. 13:42-50;  
Rv. 19:20

Mt. 8:12;  
Lk. 13:28  
Mt. 8:12; 22:13  
Mk. 9:48  
Jn. 8:51;  
Rv. 2:11; 20:6

Jn. 14:16;  
Ho 13:12; Nb.  
32:23; Ezk.  
16:58; 33:10;  
Jr. 2:19;  
Pr. 1:31

2Th. 1:9;  
Rm. 9:3;  
1Co. 6:9-10;  
Ga. 5:21;  
Ep. 5:5

It is not a question of punishment, but rather the necessary fruit of sin. For Saint Paul, this consisted of being excluded from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his strength; *and sinners will not inherit the kingdom of God*. Another expression is destruction, in the form of the *bowls of God's anger*.

Rm. 9:22;  
2Th. 2:3;  
Ph. 1:28; 3:19;  
Rm. 2:12;  
1Co. 8:11

Jesus and Scripture often spoke of frustration. Undoubtedly, this must be good for people nowadays. Following Jesus means listening to his complete message and trying to understand it fully in order to live it.

Dogma, which is the expression of the Church's faith, states that life is threatened by the real possibility of eternal failure, a possibility that consists of people's being able to reject God freely or to accept him, and of being freely accountable for themselves. Neither Scripture nor dogma tries to tell us ahead of time what will happen. Their intention is to clarify people's present existence before God, and to remind them that the present moment could be definitive and have eternal transcendence.

In a person's life, even in purely physical terms, certain acts take on an unexpected significance, like Hitler's decisions or the executions at Auschwitz. A simple accident can have a lifetime impact. If people do not understand or accept hell, it is because they have not understood or accepted their own greatness and responsibility, their own heart. Those who deny hell do not deny God; they deny people and the negative dimension of reality.

It must be stressed as well that all of this truth must be measured by the much more fundamental truth that God is love, that this love has been manifested absolutely, definitively and ultimately in Jesus Christ, and that no one who truly loves Jesus can be lost. There are certain attitudes that ensure people forever: love and service to God, Jesus and others.

1Jn. 4:8ff

Mt 25:31ff

## Eternal Fulfillment

We take eternal fulfillment, or heaven, to mean people's final and definitive participation on God's life, which has been given to them as their own and as their ultimate goal in life. It is the fullness of consummated salvation, the absolute and complete fulfillment of God's saving will. It is ultimately what people were created and redeemed for, and what they reach through their life lived in human fullness. It is something they come to earn and that is given to them as a reward, and at the same time, it is something that surpasses their merits and that is given to them as grace, gratuitously.

1 Tm. 2:4

Sanctifying grace, which is given as fullness of earthly human life, and which is participation of Christ's life in all people, becomes the seed and the pledge of Christ's glorious life, the fullness of human life in heaven.

The salvation of the soul means nothing if it does not encompass the salvation of the entire person. The fundamental meaning of this expression is the definitive participation in the glory of Jesus Christ. When

salvation is understood in terms of wholeness, it is not a question of body and soul, but an interpersonal relationship that involves the whole person, and that is absolutely Christ-centered and unique. Just as Christ's life was the way to the Father, by means of his Passion and death, in the same way our life, in communion with Jesus, is for us the way to the resurrected Christ. God's uniqueness is expressed in the exclusivity of Jesus as the only Son and universal mediator for all people. He is the glorious and visible image. The fact that Jesus is the visualization of the invisible God is not meaningful only as a historical and earthly revelation, but as a saving message and a revelation of God's unique way of communicating.

Heaven is not a place or a time. It is not a feast, or a house, or up or down. All of these expressions belong to metaphorical language that comes from people's dreams and tries to spark their imagination.

Resurrected beings, even though they are perpetually linked to the historical and spatial dimensions, will be freed of time and space, in other words, spiritualized. Heaven is not an eternal duration, or time standing still. Trying to understand eternity with time-bound categories can lead to profound contradictions. Eternity is not limitless time, it is something beyond time and cannot be translated into space-time categories. It is more accurate to speak of heaven as an interpersonal relationship to which people accede through Christ as means and cause, in whom they find God as the end and the reward. Thus Jesus is not just the way, the door or the bridge to attain communion with God. He is the person in whom God communicates himself to us fully, the

maximum expression and fullest gift of the one and only God. The fact that there is no greater communication than that which takes place through Jesus does not imply a limitation to God's possibility, but rather the fullness of God's expression in Jesus. Jesus has been given as the maximum gift for this life and for eternal life.

For Saint Paul, eternal life was not so much a vision of God as a being with Christ. The cause and prototype of resurrection and eternal life was Christ himself, resurrected. In Saint John, eternal life is revealed as following Christ in glory.

*Father, I want those that you have given me to be with me where I am, so that they may always see the glory you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.*

Jn. 17:24  
Jn. 14:3ff  
Jn. 12:26

And after I have gone and prepared you a place, I shall return and take you with me, so that where I am, you may be, too.

If a man serves me, he must follow me, wherever I am, my servant will be there, too.

We can say that heaven is the fullness of the possibilities of the whole person in a harmonious relationship with himself, with the world and with God, and that it is capable of making the person happy forever.

Heaven fulfills people in all their dimensions: the dimension that looks to the world as presence and intimacy with all things, the dimension that looks to

others as perfect communion and fraternity, and above all, the dimension that looks to God as filial union and definitive participation in God's gift through Jesus Christ. In their earthly life people live possibilities that they cannot fulfill completely. They will always be an unfinished project, an incomplete symphony, a wistful heart; they can never be definitively and completely fulfilled. People who are fundamentally oriented toward God from the beginning cannot find their fulfillment anywhere other than this center of gravity and magnetism that draws them.

In the year 107,  
Letter to the  
Rm. 6:2

The antithesis of life is resolved in the synthesis of vital communion with God. On earth, people are always a vocation. The process of becoming a human ends with the definitive encounter with God. As Saint Ignatius of Antioch wrote in the 2nd century, When I get there, to heaven, that is when I will be a man. Only in their eternal fulfillment do people attain that which they had in the beginning as their point of departure, that which was their calling in life and that which after their death is their goal: their destiny is the perfect image and likeness of God, which makes them fully human. The image and likeness of God in which people have been created refers not only to the origin, the essence and the foundation, but also to their destiny and their eternal fulfillment; not only to a part of their being but to the wholeness of their person; not to a certain moment but to their whole life.

Ex. 33:20;  
Jn. 1:18

Here on earth people cannot see God. The first reason is because God is not visible.

Scripture says that in heaven *we will see God face to face*, but this is a metaphor. This *seeing God* should not

be imagined statically, as if we were meeting another person or attending a performance. It is not the eyes that see, but the person. To see, in the Biblical sense, means more than to know, to feel and to show oneself fully. To see is to love profoundly. When we say, "I feel like seeing you," it is not about curiosity; it is about affection. The vision of God is a way of expressing the ineffable.

Eternal life is the term used most often in the Bible to refer to heaven. Life is the greatest gift that people have. The miracle of human beings is that they are alive. Nothing demands their existence. Life was given to them like a seed, so that it could germinate with the fullness of life.

Mt. 19:16;  
Jn. 3:16; 6:27;  
10:28; 17:3;  
Rm 2:7; 6:22;  
Ga. 6:8;  
Tt. 1:2;  
1Jn. 2:25

*You must run in the same way, meaning to win. All the fighters at the games go into strict training; they do this just to win a wreath that will wither away, but we do it for a wreath that will never wither.* (1Co. 9:25)

*Happy the man who stands firm when trials come. He has proved himself, and will win the prize of life, the crown that the Lord has promised to those who love him.* (Jm. 1:12)

Heaven, even though it is people's ultimate goal, is a message that has been given to them not so much so that they will think about what is to come, but so that they give full meaning to their temporal reality and their earthly task. The finish line urges the runner to run faster, to be more aware and more present, to take possession of things with greater commitment. Heaven is a light that is meant to illuminate this life.



# 6 The Integrated Person

## **The Unique and Irreplaceable Human Person**

People are specific subjects with their own non-transferable peculiarities. This is what we mean when we say that people are individuals. Only that which is particular and individual really exists; universal qualities are in the mind that generalizes and proposes concepts. The principle of individuation is the term used to refer to that by which a subject is this and not that.

In classical philosophy (Platonic, Aristotelian and Scholastic), the principle of individuation is matter. In Saint Thomas' thinking, for example, what makes a person an individual is the space-time dimension, her location here and not there, and a limited now. In the end, it is her material being that makes her the subject she is. Each person is each person, not on account of their soul (that would make everyone the same), but on account of their body, which specifies the person. When the soul enlivens one body and not another, it is personified; therefore, in Thomistic philosophy, the body is the principle of individuation.

The Hebrews do not separate the human person into two separate components: soul and body. They do not think in dualistic categories. The principle of in-

Ps 139;  
Ep 1:3-17;  
Rm 8:28-30

dividuation does not come from the creature, but from the Creator.

What makes a human being this and not that is God's love and care; that is what personifies and individualizes her.

In the Biblical mindset, it is not the matter or the spirit that makes the person, but his whole reality. The Hebrew thinker would reason as follows:

A) Because I am I and I am thus,  
B) God knows me since I was in my mother's womb;  
C) He loves me fully and nothing about me is hidden from him,

Ps 139:1ff

c) he know me by my name,  
b) because he is my Creator;  
a) therefore I am I, and I am thus.

Knowing and loving are not just correlative and complementary terms; in a certain sense they are mutually inclusive and presuppose each other.

We can say that each human being is a name pronounced by God only once, a unique logos, a *Hapax Legmenon*. Hapax means only once; Legmenon, that which is said. The term refers to those expressions or words that appear in Scripture only once and therefore, cannot be compared directly with others. The meaning of these words is a bit mysterious, just as people are.

The human person cannot be repeated, even though faces, customs and interests are similar. God's

creative love is what makes things and people multiple and distinct. This is the message of creation. All things, and especially all people, are loved by God in a specific time place, and for a specific duration, like notes at a concert.

Human beings are persons because God loves them as persons. The ultimate reason for their being is the positive action of God the Creator. The ultimate reason of their being a person is God's personal love for them. And so, human beings are individual and personal because God loves them as unique persons.

To the Hebrew way of thinking, the person is a proper name. For God, a person's name is unique. The person and the name are one. The person is a proper name that must be pronounced and loved by everyone, because she is very much loved by God.

Ex. 33:12-17

Adam named all things, but Adam was named by God. Jesus, who is the Adam beyond compare, the apex of all people, was named by God himself. A name is a kind of personification. It is the word that corresponds to the person; it touches the person in the deepest part of his personal being. It refers to his nature, his function and his conditions. For this reason, Hebrews profess a kind of devotion of the name of God, of Jesus and of others. Paul, for example, says *that all beings should bend the knee at the name of Jesus and every tongue should acclaim Jesus Christ as Lord*, because Christ Jesus was given the name which is above all other names. Peter works miracles in his name and says *of all the names in the world given to men, this is the only one by which we can be saved*.

Lk. 2:21; 1:31

Ph. 2:9-11

Ac. 3:6

Ac. 4:12

The art of Biblical thinking does not consist of abstracting, but of concretizing. Thus events, once they take place, should be remembered and pondered, and even celebrated. For this reason, the past has meaning and validity for the future.

Hebrews understand concrete things better than abstractions, which is why the prophets preach with symbols, signs and sacraments. They feel that only what is represented can be understood. Pure ideas do not exist. God can be understood because he is not always silent, because he shows himself somehow. It would mean nothing, for example, for God to be rich in love and faithfulness and to forgive defiance, iniquity and sin if he did not forgive this particular contrite and humbled heart.

Ex. 34:6;  
Ps. 51 ff.

The coordinates of space and time are not the only things that make a person unique and distinct; there are also feelings, experiences, light, energy, illusions and anxieties. Just as it is I who make my life, I also build my own identity. Life as a whole means identity and continuity. The lived life is an integral part of a person's own individuality, and the unique events of her history form part of her identity.

We can refer to the unity of all beings, or to the unity of the person, or we can refer to the unity of life by reflecting on our own experiences.

The metaphysical identity of being is not what causes people anxiety. They feel anxious about the identity of their own particular life, the faithfulness of their history, the continuity of their convictions. Thus personal identity can be lost, as well as recovered. The

Bible is a book that helps to identify the human person, more than God. It is a history with a message for people and about people, and therefore, about God.

The stages of life and the values that are lived in each stage, are two different things. If the stages were merely biological stages, naked like the illustrations in a medical text, life would be like a series of slides: cold and dissected. Just as each stage has its own image, it also has its own meaning. What gives unity to life is lived values.

What makes Israel be Israel is its history: its God, its faith, its joy, its immense suffering. What makes you be you is your own history: the feelings and experiences you have had, your convictions. You thus come to take responsibility not only for what you do, but also for what you are and come to be. The Little Prince came to understand that what made his rose unique was the time he had devoted to it. History as a series of lived experiences is what made the rose unique. For Israel it was very important to hold on to its history. To commemorate something meant to hold on to it somehow. We are aware of our personal identity by the life we have lived.

It is necessary to hold on to the notes in order to hear the music. People who do not remember the moments of their life and bring them together, and transcend them, will never hear the music in their life. We have to bring the notes together to enjoy the melody. And just as appreciating or interpreting music is an art that takes time to learn, it is also an art to bring together the moments of a life and find meaning in them.

## **What is Human about the Human Person**

If we ask ourselves what makes a person human, the answer is not simple. Because not everything that all people do is human, not even that which occurs naturally and spontaneously. People feel profoundly linked to animals; they know that nothing that is animal is foreign to them. There are times when they conceive of themselves as animals, but they also know that there is something that sets them above the animals. They sense that what is most personal to them, what is most theirs, is that which somehow surpasses their animal nature.

It is not feelings that make people typically human. There are animals with feelings that are purer than people's, and people are capable of feelings that are completely inhuman.

Nor is it physical or moral weakness that makes people human; in that case, the weakest or most abject person would be the most human. Natural is not the same as human (Hegel). A person's humanity consists of overcoming what is natural.

What is human in a person is not a common denominator derived from an abstraction or a representative sampling of human beings.

A person's humanity is not based on his belonging to a biological genus. What is human is not the person as such. A person is not human by virtue of being the 6 billionth part of the human race.

What makes a person human is an inner quality, a vocation to be more than what he is. To be human means to be pulled toward a justice that has never been put into practice, to be called to a more radical freedom, to be compelled to love more and more.

What is human in a person is a system or set of values, a way of living and of respecting life. It is the capacity to go beyond oneself and take an interest in others. It is not an ideal that people propose for themselves, it is a goal that is imposed on them.

The drama of the world, and of humanity, is that it can come to be inhabited by inhuman people.

What makes a person human is her special belonging to God, or to put it more precisely, the fact that God belongs to her. God is an indispensable element for understanding people in terms of the divine that is in them. And what is inhuman is the lack of God. Thus, the more atheist people become, the more inhuman they are. God is humanity's central point, the foundation and the source.

Philosophers have tried to answer the question: What are values? And they have come up with a number of definitions.

Some, like Hartmann, see values of superworldly ideas that people introduce into reality. For others,



setting a value on reality means getting to the bottom of being, because being is not just reality that can be experienced and subjected to natural laws. Value is one of the properties of being. Being is valuable.

Value can be defined as being itself inasmuch as it attracts the will. Value is in people who perceive it in valuable being, which makes it subjective and conditional, even though it is grounded in the order of what is real. It is also normative, in that it is rooted in being itself. Value can belong to many orders and these can be subordinated to one another; it can be useful, delightful, necessary, accidental, relative, economical, vital, spiritual, etc., depending on its relationship with the being in which it is located. Value, then, depends on what is real and on our capacity to appreciate it.

We can think that values are certain principles that demand action from people. Justice, for example, demands to be done, freedom demands to be lived, truth demands to be accepted or carried out. In the final analysis, values are not so much impersonal virtues as ways that God is present in people, demanding their fulfillment. People do not exist to satisfy themselves; they are not their own legislators. People encounter values as an imperative that emerges from reality.

It is also a value for people, and a demand from God, not to be self-centered, but to go beyond oneself by reaching out to others, and even to go beyond others by reaching out to God. Neither others, nor work, nor the world can be the ultimate object of people's aspirations to be human. An ultimate meaning that is not derived from an ultimate being, or a

supreme value that is not proposed by a supreme being, would have no meaning or value.

What is human in people is their divine dimension; in Biblical terms, their likeness to God. People succeed at being human not by penetrating the depths of the world, or by possessing it, but by finding themselves in such a way that they can become the people that others need. The proof of a person's humanity is his degree of sensitivity to others' suffering. The capacity for compassion is the piece of God's heart that people carry around inside.

Any lack of humanism has always been considered a kind of sin. And conversely, any sin is per se profoundly inhuman.

When people lose part of their humanity, they lose something that is extremely valuable. We all have the obligation to struggle for a more human humanity. Like in the Spanish conquest, we are trading gold for a handful of trinkets, and the worst thing about it is that we are happy and blind.

What must we do when technology invades the life of all people? When everything is for sale? When machines automatically displace people?

We will have the most tragic and sublime of tasks: to rescue people, to help them be human.

I do not wish to make a list of the sins of our times, but I do want to say that the greatest of them is a lack of humanism. Sin is when people are deformed. Also, when they lack religion: there is no relationship with

God. People run and hide and want to be someone else. They are not afraid of drugs or they are afraid and somehow they are convinced that religion is the opium of the people. What they do not realize is that the lack of religion is poison.

All of us believe that reality somehow is limited to what we can understand. We try to reduce events to the scope of our self, as if the world and history existed solely to gratify our ego, and all reality were reduced to fit through the slot of our understanding.

A man lost his hearing, and from then on he claimed that music did not exist. If people gathered in a hall, it was because they were hypnotized by the movement of the violin bows, or by a certain spell the conductor had over them. He found it easy to rationalize, but impossible to prove. There are those who deny the existence of God because they find it easier to say that music does not exist than to hear it.

It is reasonable for people to go beyond their own reason, to venture out in search of the truth. What is human in people is to look beyond their own limits.

Atheism is the most drastic form of lack of humanism; atheistic humanism is not human. It is lack of relationship, self-sufficiency; it is settling for the constraints of one's own limits.

Ph 4:9

What is human in people is their inner relationship with justice, truth, love, beauty, reason; ultimately it is their relationship with God. What is human in people is their divine dimension: their likeness to God.

## **People and the Life of Christ in Them**

We have seen that people are never alone; that God feels and cares a great deal about people's lives; that the divine element in human existence is life; that people develop in their relationship with others and with God; that the meaning of people's lives is found in service, and that the only way to serve God is by serving others; that in each stage and at each point of the curve of life, God seeks people out.

We can now ask ourselves whether God is a passion that people consume uselessly; and whether, in fact, people are not God's failures.

When we asked what makes people authentically human, we came up with the divine dimension: life. And now we ask again whether the fullness of the divine or of human life is just the life we live, or something more. The answer is "something more": the guiding force behind the world, history and people, is grace.

Rm. 5:20

Grace, in the Biblical sense of the word, means good will, fellowship, love. It is God's contentment with people. In the New Testament, particularly in Luke and Paul, grace refers to God's love that heals and frees people, and leads them to fullness within the history of salvation. Grace is the salvation that God gives through Jesus in the Gospel.

2Co. 9:8;  
Ep. 2:6;  
2Tm. 2:1

Grace is also the fullness of God the Savior's life and love in people. Grace is life, more specifically, the life of the risen Christ in people.

Rm. 5:5  
and 15

Grace is God's salvation, capable of overcoming people's striving toward condemnation; it is God's searching, capable of overcoming people's flight. It is God's superabundance against people's superlimitations. Where sin flourishes, grace overflows.

Grace is what people receive without deserving it, without merit; they receive it, in fact, in spite of their faults. They receive it freely, gratuitously; that is why it is called grace. It surpasses people's limits; that is why it is supernatural.

Rm. 3:24;  
4:16

It is something that characterizes and marks people. But it must not be codified, or detached from the human complex. In the not-so-distant past, too much stress was laid on analyzing grace as a quality that people lose or recover as a function of their faults and contrition. Grace was seen as an accidental quality of people, and became depersonalized. Grace, more than something, is someone. It is Christ himself in people's inner selves. It is God in people's favor, and it only occurs in people as grace. It is the fullness and the crown of what it means to be human, and it occurs in life, in nature, which grace does not destroy or disfigure. On the contrary, grace presupposes nature. Nature and life are the conditions that make grace possible, and grace makes people more authentically human; it perfects them. In each person, and in each people, nation or culture, grace, that is, Christ's life in people, takes on the shape that conforms to nature,

history and people in their specific conditions. Grace is always multiform.

It is an interpersonal relationship and adapts to people and their conditions. It always has a Christ-centered meaning, because it comes from Christ, is maintained by Christ, and leads to Christ, because there is no love of God other than his love for Jesus, and in him, for all people, and the fullest and greatest form of communication from God and with God is through Jesus.

All grace from the true God is Christian. Knowledge and consciousness neither make nor constitute grace. People who are saved within Buddhism are also saved by the grace of Christ.

John asserts that Christ is the true light that illuminates all people who come into this world. Some are enlightened in one way, some in another, each according to their specific situation. Grace that is rudimentary, primitive, ambiguous or limited is no less Christian.

Grace is God's saving force in people and in people's favor. Grace is God's force in people. In this sense, grace and the Holy Spirit that lives in people, who are its temple, are one and the same. Grace is not just the divine dimension that people have; it is God himself sanctifying them. Saint Irenaeus said that the Holy Trinity was God the Father, God the Son, and people, that is to say, the Holy Spirit projected *ad extra*, outward, toward people. It is God in people's favor. It is God in people. It is important, however, not

Jn. 1:9

A. Orbe,  
Antropología de  
San Ireneo

to construe God in people's favor as a God at people's beck and call, but as a God who cares for people.

1Co. 3:16  
1Co. 6:19

The Holy Spirit and the Spirit of Christ, in the language of the New Testament, are one and the same. They are seen as identical when the discussion is about people's disqualification.

Because the way in which the historic risen Jesus makes himself present in history and in people, is through his Spirit.

Grace is the communion of life with Christ, like the communion of the vine with its branches; it is his own Spirit that gives us life and strength by making us a perfect union with him as members of one body. Grace has the same effects on us and yields the same fruit, by participation and as a gift, that nature had on Jesus.

Ac. 15:11  
Ep. 2:7

Thus, by participating in what Jesus is, we are God's children. We participate in his saving mission and have the same destiny as Jesus: we are heirs of the kingdom of heaven. Grace as communion of temporal life with Christ blossoms into communion of eternal life with the risen Christ.

Grace is following Jesus in life. Life lived and accepted naturally is linked to grace. Grace is linked more closely to life than to nature. Life is grace. Life is the element of communion with Christ in which grace is given to us. Life given up for love brings grace.

Rm. 5:2 and 17

And just as sin is the seed of death, grace is the seed of eternal life. Grace and participation in the glory of

Jesus Christ are related in the same way earthly life and eternal life are related.

Grace as the active presence of Christ in people leads us to believe in Christ himself, to accept him and trust him: it makes us follow him as a guide to the kingdom and to live in him as the kingdom itself.

Grace as a dynamic and living relationship is a whole process of interpersonal relationship that is received, grows, develops and can be lost. Its goal is to lead a person's condition to fullness, no longer as creature but as a child of God.

The purpose of the incarnation is to bring people to live the life of Jesus. For this, people must be freed from sin. Jesus is a man in order to give us God's life in abundance.

*I have come so that they may have life  
and have it to the full.* (Jn. 10:10)



# 7 People for Others

## People and the Encounter with God

Through the prophets, God wanted to raise our awareness not so much about supernatural things, but about the injustices in life and worldly affairs.

*Listen to this, you who trample on the needy  
and try to suppress the poor people of the country,  
you who say, "When will New Moon be over  
so that we can sell our corn,  
and sabbath, so that we can market our wheat?  
Then by lowering the bushel, raising the shekel,  
by swindling and tampering with the scales,  
we can buy up the poor for money,  
and the needy for a pair of sandals,  
and get a price even for the sweepings of the wheat."  
Yahweh swears it by the pride of Jacob,  
"Never will I forget a single thing you have done."*

(Am. 8:4-7)

It might seem to some that the prophets exaggerated the value of justice. They took God out of the Temple and put him in the marketplace: they subordinated worship to business and human transactions.

In the Bible, love and justice are not just evolutionary conditions of the human race; nor are they simply human values. They are something more important: God's portion in people's lives. At times it would seem that human suffering is something that stings God to

the quick. God is in people more than in the dark sanctum of the Temple, which is why he wants people to deal fairly with one another. Some might find this God too un-sacred, too concerned with human dealings. But the oppression of the poor, the lack of justice, wickedness, lack of respect and love are all things that God feels in his heart.

Justice is not an ancient custom, or a human conviction. It is a transcendental demand based on divine interest. It is not just a relationship between a person and his customer; it is an act that involves God. God needs and demands justice. God identifies with the humiliation of people: people's needs are God's needs. An injustice done to a person is an injustice done to God. And just as justice dies when it is dehumanized, even when applied to the letter, justice is also disqualified, or else it comes apart, when the demands of God are neglected.

God's preoccupation with justice is born of his compassion for people. It is not an obligation imposed by an inherent ethical principle called justice. It is God's relationship with his people.

Justice in itself is no more important than truth or freedom; justice is important because it pulls at God's heart, and the lack of justice humiliates him.

*To oppress the poor is to insult his creator,  
to be kind to the needy is to honor him.  
To mock the poor is to insult his creator,  
he who laughs at distress shall not go unpunished.*

(Pr. 14:31; 17:5)

*Yahweh Sabaoth, the God of Israel, says this:  
Amend your behavior and your actions,  
treat each other fairly,  
do not exploit the stranger, the orphan, the widow,  
do not shed innocent blood in this place. (Jr. 7:5ff)*

Justice is not an abstraction, and it is more than a value. Justice exists with respect to people, it is something that a person does. The lack of justice is condemned not so much because the law is broken, but because people are hurt.

We might wonder: what is so valuable about what we now call a person, which in the Old Testament was anyone who suffered injustice? The answer could be that a person is a being whose pain touches God's heart.

*You must not be harsh with the widow, or with the orphan. If you are harsh with them, they will surely cry out to me, and be sure I shall hear their cry. If he cries to me, I will listen, for I am full of pity. (Ex. 22:21-23 and 26)*

People are not just the image of God; they are also his unending preoccupation. What people do affects not only their own life and that of others, but also God's life to the extent it affects others. God's presence and care for people gives a new meaning and a new dimension to human existence.

God has a special predilection for the neediest, for the person suffering an existential crisis. This predilection is a bond with God that marks both the person and God, and that should not be seen as a sign

of discrimination or difference among people. God's predilection is a personal bond with him, not a cause for distinction or separation. When we speak of predilection, we mean to highlight God's love and the object of his care; we are not trying to make distinctions among people or separate them.

It would be a mistake to interpret the parable of the Good Shepherd by concluding that God loves the lost sheep more than the other ninety-nine who are safe. The parable is meant to point out God's solicitude for the person in crisis, in sin, and the joy he feels when this person is brought safely home. It is not a case of setting up the one against the other ninety-nine.

The reason Israel was chosen over the other nations was not its strength or its splendor; on the contrary, it was its insignificance, its weakness, its poverty and its pain.

*You were easily counted,  
few in number, strangers to the country.* (1Ch 16:19)

*Your fathers numbered only seventy...* (Dt. 10:22)

God chose Israel not on account of some quality that is inherent to a poor nation, but in order to lift it out of its poverty and slavery, and thus reveal himself to them as a saving God. This is why God has a special predilection for the poor, not because of their poverty or the injustice they suffer, but because they are persons, and in order to lift them out of their suffering and misery. Poverty is a disadvantage for people, and that is why God is on the side of the poor.

In itself, poverty is not a value. Neither God through the prophets, nor Jesus or the apostles, taught people to be devoted to poverty. Jesus raised more eyebrows with his liberality regarding material things, in contrast to ascetics like John the Baptist.

In Isaiah's parable, God takes such great care of his people so that they will practice justice.

Is. 5:1ff

*He expected justice, but found bloodshed,  
integrity, but only a cry of distress.* (Is. 5:7)

The sense of justice in people is a faint echo of God's sense of justice. The exploitation of the poor is less important to people than to God: people may disapprove, but God feels wounded.

Mt. 11: 18-19;  
Jn. 12:4;  
Mk. 2:23ff

#### Note:

It should be pointed out that the term justice in our language has a much more circumscribed meaning than the concept *Sedeq* and *Sedagah* in the Biblical language. In Hebrew it can mean holiness, rectitude, compliance, faithfulness, obedience, but it always has to do with the relationship between God and people, or among people. It is a predicate that belongs first to God, and then to people or things. God is just, but so are people, ways, laws, weights and measures, sacrifices.

Justice infuses all areas of people's lives. Set your hearts on his kingdom first, and on his righteousness and thirst for what is right refer to correct conduct in accordance with God's will; it is God's right with regard to his people's obligations. Thus God guides those who act with integrity. Luke explains that being worthy in the sight of God involves scrupulously observing all the commandments and observances of the Lord.

Mt. 6:33; 5:6  
Is. 64:4

Lk. 1:6

## Service and the Encounter with Jesus in People

Jesus fulfilled the ideal of being a human person. He managed to do what the Old Testament asked people to do in order to fulfill themselves: love God with all their heart, with all their soul and with all their strength, and to walk in the way of the Lord. He also realized that that love should be shown to people by loving them the same way. Jesus was God's man for others.

With his resurrection, Jesus, as a human person, and what is human in him, i.e., all humans, are forever tied to God. Because, as Tertullian said, "*we are the flesh taken from the Virgin Mary*". And what he assumed once, he assumed forever. Jesus' human nature is not just his soul and his body, it is all people.

We can say of Jesus that precisely because he is a man, he is the Son of God, in the fullest and deepest sense that this can be said of God as Father and Jesus as Only-Begotten Son.

This Jesus is the standard of humanity for Christians down through the ages. And not only did he see no opposition between human and divine nature, he brought them together in the most impressive way. He himself was the perfect synthesis.

Is. 7:14;  
2P. 1:17;  
Jn. 1:18

Jesus taught people the principles and right ways to become human in accordance with revelation. Just as he did not preach a Christology, he did not preach an Anthropology either. He himself was the Christ, and the Human Person beyond compare. He is the revelation of the human person for the human person, as well as the standard of people's service and self-giving for others and for God.

Jesus' great impact consisted of knowing how to win over the hearts of his followers. This is still his great strength. Thus, for the person who has found Jesus, he is not just one among many; he is the "Thou" that invites me and helps me to be "I". Jesus is the "Thou" of God who invites people to go beyond their "I", and accompanies them in the process. Because it only by going beyond themselves that people are saved. Those who lose their life taking care of others will find it; those who give it, receive it back.

We can say that the main points of Jesus' convictions and teachings, were these:

+ That God is our Father and that all people are brothers and sisters. There can be no human brotherhood without divine fatherhood. This is why people should place all their trust in God's attention and care, and love others as brothers and sisters.

+ Jesus announced that the kingdom of God has arrived as love, mercy and peace, and that it is directed specifically at the needy, at those who are marginalized for any reason, at sinners, the poor, the sick, and the simple-hearted.

Mt. 4:20;  
Lk. 5:27;  
Jn. 8:12; 18:15

Mt. 17:33



+ To the surprise of his followers, Jesus did not directly engage in changing the religious and social structures of his time. He preferred to help people to be better and to act better. He concerned himself with situating people before God and their neighbors, more than in advancing an ideology. He aroused and inspired a deep trust, and freedom; he consciously took on the risks involved in letting people be people, and God be God.

+ Jesus based his doctrine on the love of God and love for others, but this was not especially controversial. The reason Jesus caused such a stir was that he insisted that effective love for others was the concrete way of expressing love for God.

Jesus based his doctrine on love. A love that embraces justice, but is not limited to it. When love is reduced to justice, both love and justice are degraded. Justice is the first requirement of love; there can be no love where there is no justice. It is more important for people to love than to be just, or to be a saint or a martyr. To love means to go beyond oneself toward the person who is loved.

1Jn. 4:8

People value their capacity to love as one of their most noble traits. *God is love*, says Saint John, and that is why we can suppose that the human person is love. The human person is love, because God is love. By love and for love, the human person was made in God's image and likeness.

Love is a transitive verb; true love is not love of oneself, for oneself and in oneself. Of course, the starting point and foundation of love for God and for

others is love for oneself, but this should never be the final goal. If it were, we would never know what the word love means, nor could we experience God as love. Love always presupposes a person or an object of the act of loving.

The main object of God the Father's love is his son, Jesus Christ, the Only-Begotten and much loved, and in him, all people and all things. Christ *brings everything together*, said Saint Paul; that is, he summarizes, concentrates, gathers all things first for the Father, and therefore, for creation itself.

Ep. 1:22

And people, made in God's image and likeness, in spite of being sinful, are also love. This is what defines them most authentically. People, however, tend to proceed from the bottom up: first they love what is closest to them, what is most pleasing, most perceptible, and sometimes most deceiving. Little by little loves forces them, or teaches them, to go beyond themselves, until it demands that they give up everything, including themselves. And then, when people truly give of themselves, they overcome selfishness, because there is no selfishness in the gift of oneself.

Gn 1:26; 5:1;  
Mt 7:10

God is love; that is a good way to describe him. God as love should not be taken as an abstract, metaphysical idea. This statement about God contains all the beauty and ambiguity of an abstraction. Love is situated when it is directed at someone and comes from someone; when it comes from a person and is directed at a person.

God is forever in love, and shows himself as such throughout the History of Salvation and throughout a

Irenaeus,  
Ad Haer., IV, 20, 4ff;  
V, 1,1.

person's own concrete history. God's love in history takes concrete shape in God's love for the person. To love, in the Bible, means history, events that in the future will belong to history.

The fullness of God's love manifests itself in the gift of his own Son, the only-begotten and much loved; and its greatest expression in people and for people is love for Jesus Christ and of Jesus Christ. God is love for Jesus as the only-begotten and first-born, as the head and as the vine; and for people as members or branches of this one living reality that is the Lord, because *God's glory is in the living man's greatest fullness, and man's life in his communion with Christ*, wrote Saint Irenaeus.

Jesus is God's love made history. And because he is in history, and revealed himself that way, we know that he is God's love in eternity as well.

The faith that announces and reveals God and Jesus Christ, announces and reveals the human person herself. The message that announces that God is love for people, announces that people are also capacity to love others, and in them, to love God, and that they are expected to do so.

People are love, and fulfill themselves by loving. Love is, in the final analysis, the value or meaning of their personal being as question, answer, acceptance and self-giving. Because people are a question, and they fulfill themselves by asking; people are an answer, and they fulfill themselves by answering; people are welcomed, and they fulfill themselves by accepting; people give of themselves, and fulfill them-

selves by giving. Anything that does not contain a meaning of love is not human, does not fulfill people, nor does anything that does not contain a minimum of consciousness and freedom.

For Saint Augustine, love has no limits other than those imposed by love itself. The limits of love are love. Love that goes beyond its own limits ceases to be love, and becomes frustration, non-giving, non-love. The happiness and joy of loving become the sadness of having trespassed the limits of love.

People are responsible for their capacity to love, and the love that they carry inside is an experience of God. People are also responsible for the object of their love, for the person they give their heart to, and this is an allusion to love for God. People are responsible for being in love; love is not something that happens, but a way of life. Jesus has taught us to love others as we love ourselves, and not to do to others what we would not want for ourselves.

Faith sees with more than the eyes, and values people more than reason does. Jesus' message is a message to people about people. What is remarkable is that after making such progress for so long in the knowledge of other things, people are still so ignorant about themselves.

Jesus asked his followers to strive to love each other as they loved him. When he was about to give his love to the utmost, he said: A man can have no greater love than to lay down his life for his friends.

Jn. 15:13

*You are my friends,  
if you do what I command you:  
love one another  
as I have loved you.* (Jn. 15:14,12)

In this way, Jesus goes one step farther in terms of mutual love: he asked his followers, his disciples, to love one another as they loved him.

And that is not all: when it seems that he has reached the extreme, Jesus ascends one more step. He says that people should love one another with an intensity that approaches the love that he has for his Father, so that they become one, as he and the Father form a single reality. We have not yet understood that the unity of the world demands the unity of the human species. And it will be even harder to understand that the unity of God demands the unity of people, that there must be a single flock, because there is only one shepherd, and a division among people is a painful wound in God's feelings.

Saint John said:

*This is the message as you heard it from the beginning: that we are to love one another...  
This has taught us love that he gave up his life for us;  
and we, too, ought to give up our lives for our  
brothers. If a man who was rich enough in this world's  
goods saw that one of his brothers was in need, but  
closed his heart to him, how could the love of God be  
living in him?  
Our love is not to be just words or mere talk, but something real and active.*

*(God's) commandments are these: that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and that we love one another as he told us to...*

*Let us love one another, since love comes from God and everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God. Anyone who fails to love can never have known God, because God is love.*

*God's love for us was revealed when God sent into the world his only Son so that we could have life through him; this is the love I mean: not our love for God, but God's love for us when he sent his Son... Since God has loved us so much, we too should love one another.*

*No one has ever seen God; but as long as we love one another, God will live in us and his love will be complete in us...*

*Anyone who says, "I love God," and hates his brother, is a liar, since a man who does not love his brother that he can see, cannot love God, whom he has never seen. So this is the commandment that he has given us, that anyone who loves God must also love his brother.*

*(1 Jn. 3:11ff; 4:7ff)*

## **Christ's Demands on Others**

God is not the expression of people. People are the expression of God, inasmuch as people surpass all existing beings. Thus, God's vocabulary is human. It is

important for people that God addresses them with human words. Anthropomorphisms are not just figures of speech that people use; God does, too. We know God and care about God only insofar as he appeals to people. We only know one aspect of the divine being: the aspect in which he addresses people. That is why people must be understood with God's vocabulary, or to put it another way, people must be understood in terms of people. God is never going to speak with a better, clearer voice than the human voice.

When the Word became flesh, it became God's greatest expression. And not only did he assume what is human, he also gave us what he is.

God not only sees to people's needs, he also expresses and sets forth his demands in the form of the neediest. In concrete, flesh-and-blood people, that is, in weak and limited people, God expresses himself. People need God in order to be not just flesh, and to go beyond their limitations.

Understanding God is not the point; the point is to understand people. And yet we will know almost nothing of people unless we make reference to God, because people are relative beings and their fundamental relationship is with God.

We do not look for God in order solve our human problems, or to blame heaven for what happens on earth. The real problem is not God, it is people.

Salvation is an announcement and an anthropological event. All theology, as Karl Rahner says, is reduced

to human molds because it is always a message from God to people, from people and for people.

Just as Jesus is the human person beyond compare, the Logos, the Word is God's definitive and unsurpassable revelation.

*At various times in the past,  
and in various different ways,  
God spoke to our ancestors  
through the prophets;  
but in our own time, the last days,  
he has spoken to us through his Son,  
the Son that he has appointed to inherit everything  
and through whom he made everything there is.*

(Heb. 1:1-2)

Jesus is God's maximum expression. In Jesus, God makes himself accessible to people, and Jesus makes himself accessible in our neighbor, in others and particularly in the neediest.

The affection that Jesus felt during his life for people in crisis, for those that went to him full of diseases and defects, for all those who were unable even to mount a protest march, reflect the place where Jesus chose to position himself before the Father and before the people of his times. He proclaimed the kingdom of God and took it to the marginalized. He caused great scandal by sitting at the table with tax collectors and sinners. He took care of invalids, blessed the poor and the afflicted and said that the kingdom of heaven was theirs. He loved, and spoke of love, to those who had never known love before. To the unrighteous and sinners he spoke of grace and



aroused in them feelings of justice and truth. Jesus did not marginalize anyone, not even those who were publicly and openly against God. Jesus did not marginalize Nicodemus, the cowardly Pharisee; or Zacchaeus, the rich crook; or the adulteress, who should have been stoned; or Mary, the prostitute. It is in keeping with the Gospel to be marginalized, or to be on the part of the marginalized, but never to marginalize.

In the Old Testament people fulfilled themselves through their love and faithfulness to the covenant with God. God's way of being is an imperative for people. *Be holy because I, your God, am holy*; this is the fundamental commandment, and all the others are derived from it. And the first of the commandments that God handed down to people, and that at the same time is the revelation of their most profound fulfillment, says:

*Listen, Israel,  
Yahweh our God  
is the one Yahweh.  
You shall love Yahweh your God  
with all your heart,  
with all your soul,  
with all your strength.*

(Dt. 6:4)

And because Yahweh is the one true God, he demands people's whole heart and whole truth. God's oneness requires a total response by people.

Faith in, and love for God correspond to faith in, and love for Jesus Christ. *Trust in God still and trust in me*. After Jesus was resurrected, faith in, and love for

Dt. 4:1; 5:29  
and 33  
Lv. 11:14; 19:2;  
20:26

Jesus is faith in, and love for God. God has revealed himself fully in the needy. No one can love God with all their heart, with all their soul and with all their strength, if they do not love Jesus the same way. And Jesus' commandment, the new commandment, orders us to show our love for Jesus by loving our brothers and sisters the same way. Love for Yahweh as the one God is love for Jesus as our Lord; and love for Jesus is love for our sisters and brothers, especially those who are closest and neediest.

In the Old Testament, total love for God is reflected in total service. In the New Testament, total love is also shown as total service. For Jesus, to serve means to love, and what love demands is service. To serve is an honor for those who follow Jesus, and it is diametrically opposed to servility. Behind service is nobility, and the assimilation of transcendent values. Love and the common good are what invite people to serve. Jesus did not come to be served, but to serve. Serving God or Jesus means nothing if it does not mean serving others out of love.

Jesus told a story to underscore the most transcendent and important points of his teachings and his way of regarding and valuing people. It is a scene from the end of history, but it is not a preview of the last judgment. It does not try to list all the aspects by which a person can be evaluated; in fact, some very important points, like faith, are not considered. It is not an inventory, but the revelation of the religious value of what it means for people and God to care about others. Saint Matthew puts this story at the end of Jesus' discourse, as if to summarize all of the Master's teachings; it is a scene that visualizes the end of the

Jn. 14:1ff  
Dt. 10:12; 11:13  
Jn. 13:12-34;  
14:15; 1Jn. 4:21  
Lk. 22:24-27

Mt. 20:28;  
Mk. 10:45

world and the last judgment, which serves to highlight the decisiveness of the issue at hand. The Son of Man is sitting on his throne of glory with all the nations before him, and he explains what is ultimately most important. Although the story mentions those who did good works without realizing it, Jesus reveals the Christ-centered reference that all good works have for his followers. Jesus insists that it is not right to wait until the end to discover this sense in others.

*When the Son of Man comes in his glory,  
escorted by all the angels,  
then he will take his seat on his throne of glory.  
All the nations will be assembled before him  
and he will separate men one from another  
as the shepherd separates sheep from goats.  
He will place the sheep on his right hand  
and the goats on his left.  
Then the King will say to those on his right hand,  
"Come, you whom my Father has blessed,  
take for your heritage the kingdom  
prepared for you since the foundation of the world.  
For I was hungry and you gave me food;  
I was thirsty and you gave me drink;  
I was a stranger and you made me welcome;  
naked and you clothed me, sick and you visited me,  
in prison and you came to see me."  
Then the virtuous will say to him in reply,  
"Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you;  
or thirsty and give you drink?  
When did we see you a stranger and make you wel-  
come;  
naked and clothe you;  
sick and in prison and go to see you?"  
And the King will answer,*

*"I tell you solemnly,  
 in so far as you did this to the least of these brothers of  
 mine,  
 you did it to me."  
 Next he will say to those on his left hand,  
 "Go away from me, with your curse upon you,  
 to the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.  
 For I was hungry and you never gave me food;  
 I was thirsty and you never gave me anything to drink;  
 I was a stranger and you never made me welcome,  
 naked and you never clothed me,  
 sick and in prison and you never visited me."  
 Then it will be their turn to ask,  
 "Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty,  
 a stranger or naked, sick or in prison,  
 and did not come to your help?"  
 Then he will answer,  
 "I tell you solemnly,  
 in so far as you neglected to do this  
 to one of the least of these,  
 you neglected to do it to me."*

(Mt. 25:31-45)

The anthropological message of this parable is accessible only by faith, not by reason. It consists of identifying Jesus with the needy. The concrete cases are examples that could be substituted for others without altering the meaning. It is not an announcement about the future, but a revelation or reminder of the value and significance of what we do or fail to do in the present.

When Jesus says, *I was hungry and you gave me food...*, he is not making a moral, legal or vicarious consideration. He is talking about his real presence, perhaps the most demanding of all. It is in the needy

where the human person is to be found closest at hand, not in sacrifices or in the temple. That is why the worship of God is empty if it does not translate into a devotion to humanity. God's temple is the human person; there is no place in the universe more noble and worthy than the human heart. The great Temple of Jerusalem, like the Sabbath and the Law, were in Jesus' view at the service of people; people were not at the service of the Temple, or Sabbath, or the Law. The purpose of going to the temple is to be able to find Jesus everywhere, but especially in people.

*I live in a high and holy place,  
but I am also with the contrite and humbled spirit.*  
(Is. 57:15)

A God without reference to people, is an inexistent and absurd God, a product of abstraction, not the God of the Bible. And whoever believes in people without God, ends up belittling them, destroying them, and losing them.

While Jesus did not live in misery, he not only identified and made common cause with the neediest of people, but also made them his main sacrament, which is to say that he suffered in them and awaited whoever would love him.

Jesus identifies with the most delicate and fragile segment of humanity: those who suffer. People, whether they know it or not, are an essential and existential reference to Jesus Christ. This encounter with Jesus in other people determines all the other encounters with him,

*so if you are bringing your offering to the altar and  
there remember that your brother has something  
against you,  
leave your offering there before the altar,  
go and be reconciled with your brother first,  
and then come back and present your offering.*

(Mt. 5:23-24)

What is specifically Christian is not so much believing in God, as believing in people as the proper object of our love for Christ, of our faith and hope in him, of our following him and of our commitment to him. What is specifically Christian is Christ himself who lives and continues to call people to serve people.

1 Jn. 3:17; 4:20

An anthropology that does not make people better, and bring people closer together, is not Christian. Jesus did not speak of science as doctrinal content. Jesus liberated, and continues to liberate people, or to put it in more traditional vocabulary, he continues to save people. An anthropology without salvation is not Biblical, and not Christian.

Christian anthropology is something more than the anthropology of the Old Testament. God's revelation in Jesus manifested God's capacity to give of himself and love, and people's capacity to receive. And the revelation of Jesus' human nature spoke to us of people's capacity for giving and their destiny. Christian anthropology is Jesus' anthropology. On this point, Christology and anthropology converge and begin to form a continuous line. There is nothing we know about Jesus that is not a message for people and about people.

The meaning of life and death, of ourselves and others, of the here and now and the great beyond, has all been given to us in Jesus Christ. To discover the meaning of Jesus' life is to discover our own meaning. It is not a question of consoling ourselves by embracing our pain in him; it is about rooting ourselves firmly in what is most ours.

Knowing Jesus is the imperative that Paul gives us, more urgent than the *know yourself* of the Greek philosopher. From the Christian perspective, it is impossible to know the human person fully without referring to Jesus.

Situated in space and time, Jesus was familiar with the nature of human history: he lived as a Jew in his time, he experienced sorrows and joys, he died a human death. He was the son of Joseph, the carpenter. And in this man, God revealed himself and gave himself in all his fullness. Jesus, then, means the opening of people to God, or to be more precise, God's power to encounter people.

To say that Christ is human means, ultimately, that Christ's human condition is an ideal to which people strive as they grow and follow him as closely as possible. Jesus' response to the Father is still fundamental and the example for all our own personal responses.

The fact that God has expressed himself fully in Jesus means not only that Jesus took on everything that we are, but also that he gave us the capacity to participate in what he is.

Christian anthropology is the project and the fulfillment of people who are open to the divine dimension. In the reflection about people in the light of Christ's resurrection, the human dimension became eternally valid. Whoever believes in Jesus' destiny as something meaningful for people, believes in the eternity of their own meaning. And whoever accepts the revelation knows more about people and things than those who reject it. This revelation offers a knowledge that is not quantitative, but rather consists of a totally gratuitous way of seeing the world that transforms everything, deepening it and giving it meaning. It has to do with the quality of people's lives, of their personal response, of a heightened understanding of people and the cosmos, which is accessible to experience, and yet always maintains its quality of mystery that can lead to misunderstanding and misinterpretation. We can say that things- what they are and what they mean to us- are not comprehended only with the eyes, but also with the heart and with faith.



# Bibliography

## Bibliography

We offer this bibliography as a resource for readers who want to do more in-depth reading on topics of their interest. We present a brief judgment of most of the works, with the intention of evaluating them in terms of their usefulness regarding the topics covered here.

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\*\*\*Introductory (easy-to-read) book that discusses the most important theories regarding the origin and evolution of human beings. The facts it presents are useful, as well as the discussion of certain authors.

Basabe Fernández del Valle, Agustín. *Filosofía del hombre*. DeAustral, México City, 1985.

\*\*\*In this book, the author offers a systematic reflection on the fundamental issues of anthropology from a metaphysical and phenomenological point of view. The author analyzes the basic structures of human existence, which he sees as a preparation for salvation. Of particular interest are the chapters that respond to the questions What is life? What is value? What is the meaning of history and death?

Boff, Leonardo, *La resurrección de Cristo*. Nuestra resurrección en la muerte.

\*\*This little book looks at the meaning of resurrection as liberation, taking as a starting point people's yearning for life.

Boros, Ladislaus. *El hombre y su última opción*. Ed. Paulinas, Madrid, 1977.

\*\*\*This book is a philosophical and theological study of the meaning of death. In the author's viewpoint, death is presented to people as an option. By living, people decide how they want to die, and in the face of death, they can opt for giving it a definitive or a provisional meaning, a temporal or a transcendent meaning. Highly recommended.

Coreth, Emmerich, *¿Qué es el hombre? Esquema de antropología filosófica*. Ed. Herder, Barcelona, 1982.

\*\*\*In this book, the author proposes a coherent theory of the human being and his or her fundamental traits. This anthropology, written in the classical mold, considers the plurality of scientific approaches from a perspective that seeks to preserve unity. The starting point and connecting thread of the author's anthropological reflection is the person's self-understanding. A clear, systematic book, highly recommended as an introduction.

Cullmann, Oscar, *Estudios de teología bíblica*. Ediciones Studium, Madrid, 1973.

\*\*\*Written by one of the most renowned Gospel theologians of the 20th century, these studies are both masterpieces of Biblical theology and a source of genuine inspiration.

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\*\*\*\*This commentary, a classic in its field, offers a well-grounded study of Saint John's Gospel, and constitutes a required reference for any in-depth consideration of Johannine Christology.

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Eco, Umberto and Carlo Maria Martini, *¿En qué creen los que no creen?* Mexico City, Taurus, 1997.

\*\*\*This short, interesting book contrasts the secular and Christian view of a number of ethical issues.

Flick, M. Alszeghy, A. *Antropología Teológica*. Ediciones Sígueme, Salamanca, 1970.

\*\*\*This book contains a solid, systematic analysis of the classic issues of theological anthropology. It brings together Biblical and dogmatic aspects of an understanding of the human person in the light of faith.

Gevaerth, Joseph, *El problema del hombre*. Ed. Sígueme, Salamanca, 1984.

\*\*\*Few manuals of philosophical anthropology present an interpretation of human existence with such a keen sensitivity to the Christian view of the human person as this book. The main concern is the meaning of the human person and human existence, and the way to fulfillment. Highly recommended.

Gomez Caffarena, José. *Metafísica fundamental*. Ed. Cristianidad, Madrid, 1983.

\*\*\*Even though this book is about metaphysics, one of its core reflections examines basic aspects of human experience, its origin and its meaning. Of particular interest are the chapters on freedom, love and wonder.

González Faus, José Ignacio, S.J., *Carne de Dios*, Editorial Herder, Barcelona, 1969.

\*\*\*In this book, the author takes an in-depth look at the Christological thought of Saint Irenaeus of Lyon, centered on the meaning of the incarnation.

González Faus, José Ignacio, S.J. *La Humanidad Nueva*. Ensayo de Cristología. Gráficas Halar, S.L., Madrid, 1974.

\*\*\*This is a work of contemporary theology that presents the fundamental affirmations of faith in Jesus Christ from an original perspective. This two-volume work is organized systematically and in dialogue with the problems that contemporary criticism of Christian faith has raised.

Guardini, Romano, *La Aceptación de sí mismo*; las edades de la vida. Ed. Cristiandad, Madrid, 1983.

\*\*\*A reflective and descriptive look at the meaning and value of the different stages of life and the conditions for personal growth on the basis of the experience of one's own value and limits.

Guardini, Romano, *Mundo y persona*. Ed. Cristiandad, Madrid, 1974.

\*\*\*The author makes a phenomenological analysis of the concept of person from a Christian perspective. Required reading for anyone wishing to make an in-depth study of the person.

Guardini, Romano, *Preocupación por el hombre*. Ed. Guadarrama, Madrid, 1965.

\*\*\*This book brings together a series of essays that, although already several decades old, pose important questions and points for reflection that help to clarify the issues of present-day humanity. Of special interest are the chapters on Culture as creation and risk, The incomplete man, and Power and freedom.

Haeffner, Gerd, *Antropología filosófica*. Ed. Herder, Barcelona, 1984.

\*\*\*This book is highly recommended due to the depth and clarity with which it addresses the central issues of philosophical anthropology. Using a phenomenological-hermeneutical approach, the author starts out by examining the concept of the human subject and its constitutive differences with respect to other animals, in a fruitful dialogue with the social and human sciences. Although the book is an introduction, it addresses certain topics with great originality, such as the dimensions of the human person: language, sociability, historicity, corporality, and the fulfillment of existence.

Heschel, Abraham J., *Who is Man?*. Stanford University Press, California, 1965.

\*\*\*A profound book, written in a reflective style. The author

centers his exposition on the question of the sense and transcendent meaning of human life and action. A Jewish vision, based on the Biblical message and the Rabbinic tradition. An inspired and deeply religious book.

Jeremías, Joachim, *Teología del Nuevo Testamento. 1. La predicación de Jesús*. Ediciones Sígueme, Salamanca, 1977.

\*\*\*This book is one of the most solid and inspired systematic presentations of New Testament theology. The work was left unfinished due to the death of the author, one of the Evangelical Church's great Biblical theologians of the last century.

Jeremías, Joachim, *El Mensaje Central del Nuevo Testamento*. Ediciones Sígueme, Salamanca, 1966.

\*\*\*After making an intense exegetical study of the New Testament, Jeremias set forth what he considered the core Biblical message.

Léon-Dufour, Xavier, S.J., *Diccionario de Nuevo Testamento*. Ediciones Cristiandad, S.L., Madrid, 1977.

\*\*\*In this dictionary, a contemporary Catholic exegete offers a clear, well-grounded presentation of numerous terms, names and main ideas of the New Testament.

Léon-Dufour, Xavier, S.J., *Resurrección de Jesús y Mensaje Pascual*. Ediciones Sígueme, Salamanca, 1973.

\*\*\*In this book, the author makes a systematic study of the meaning of the core event of the Paschal faith, using both an exegetical and systematic approach. The study is based on the set of key New Testament passages about faith in the resurrection.

Lewis, C.S., *El problema del dolor*. Ed. Universitaria, Santiago de Chile, 1998.

\*\*\*The author makes a clear, accessible and profound reflection on the meaning and transcendence of suffering. The book offers deep insights into the problem of pain, from both a philosophical and Christian viewpoint.

Lohfink, Norberto, S.J., *Valores actuales del Antiguo Testamento*. Ed. Paulinas, 1966.

\*\*This book brings together a collection of studies by one of the great contemporary exegetes. With admirable clarity, the author

presents the evolution of the Old Testament, the story of original sin, the meaning of the commandment of love, of the law and grace, and of the human person in the face of death.

Lonergan, Bernard, *El sujeto*. ITESO, Guadalajara, 1996.

\*\*\*In this brief essay, the eminent Canadian philosopher explores the meaning of fully affirmed human subjectivity, in the face of different forms of mutilation and alienation.

López Azpitarte, Eduardo, *Fundamentación de la ética cristiana*. Madrid, 1991.

\*\*\*This book offers a profound synthesis of the basis of Christian morality within a pluralistic and skeptical society. Very well documented. Superb bibliography.

Luyten, William A., *Fenomenología existencial*. Carlos Lohlé, Buenos Aires, 1980.

\*\*\*This book develops an approach to human existence from a phenomenological perspective. The author examines the main issues concerning the meaning of existence, freedom, natural law, and the dynamics of personal fulfillment. Using philosophical language, the author manages to clarify modern problems in an original way, in dialogue with the classical tradition and contemporary existentialist thought.

Marías, Julián, *Antropología metafísica*. Ed. Revista de Occidente, Madrid, 1962.

\*\*\*This book offers a systematic approach to the search for understanding human existence. The author describes the basic structures of the incarnated person, situated in a body, in history, in relation to the world. The exposition attempts to reflect human reality as faithfully as possible, and to discover its meaning. Highly recommended for its descriptive focus and for the clarity of its positions and its language.

Moltmann, Jürgen, *El Hombre*. Cristiandad, Madrid, 1984.

\*\*\*The author makes a number of reflections on the tasks that modern-day people must assume and the risks they face. Of particular interest are his studies of the transforming and critical potential of faith within a culture that tends to limit alternatives for living and expressing faith. A clear, enlightening book.

Orbe, Antonio, S.J., *Antropología de San Ireneo*. La Editorial Católica, S.A., Madrid, 1969.

\*\*\*This book is a systematic examination of the thought of one of the Fathers of the Early Church who has inspired theological reflection throughout history. A specialized work, recommended for those who are already familiar with the main ideas of Saint Irenaeus' extensive writings.

Pérez Valera, Víctor Manuel, *Dios y la Renovación del Hombre*. Editorial Alhambra Mexicana, S.A., Mexico City, 1980.

\*\*The author makes a complete, systematic presentation of the thought of one of the great Jewish theologians of the 20th century. The central issues of Jewish theology are presented in a profound and inspired way.

Rahner, Karl, *La Gracia como Libertad*. Editorial Herder, Barcelona, 1972.

\*\*\*The studies included in this book seek to highlight the meaning that the theology of grace has today in the face of the human experience of freedom.

Ricoeur, Paul, *Historia y verdad*. Ed. Encuentro, Madrid, 1990.

\*\*\*This book brings together a series of essays on the knowledge and meaning of history. Of particular interest are the essays on Word and Praxis, The question of power, his analyses of anxiety, truth, lies and the meaning of sexuality.

Royce, James, *¿Qué soy yo?*, McGraw-Hill, New York, 1967.

\*\*\*This book examines the main issues of philosophical anthropology from a fundamentally Thomistic perspective. Recommendable for its clarity and didactic structure.

Ruiz de la Peña, Juan, *Las nuevas antropologías*. Sal Terrae, Santander, 1983. Imagen de Dios, Chap. IV, Sal Terrae, Santander, 1988.

\*\*\* Systematic and up-to-date book. In dialogue with the findings of human sciences, the author looks deeply into the Christian understanding of the human person.

Ruiz de la Peña, Juan, *Las nuevas antropologías, un reto a la Teología*. Ed. Sal Terrae, Santander, 1983.

\*\*\*This book offers a synthetic vision of contemporary



anthropological thought in dialogue with the Christian vision of the human person. The author points out the implications of some anthropological conceptions that question the vision of a free and transcendent subject, as well as the deficiencies of oversimplified visions of the human person. Highly recommended as a contribution to the dialogue between faith and culture.

Ruiz de la Peña, Juan, *Una fe que crea cultura*. Ed. Caparrós, Madrid, 1997.

\*\*\*This book contains a variety of essays in which the author engages in a dialogue with people of today concerning the issues that secular society must deal with. It also includes important articles about reality as creation, the constitution of the person and hope, death as seen from a purely rational as well as a faith perspective

Sacramentum Mundi, *Enciclopedia Teológica*. Herder, Barcelona, 1976.

\*\*\*Important reference work that makes a clear and systematic presentation of notions from philosophical and theological anthropology.

Sahagún Lucas, De Juan, *Las dimensiones del hombre*. Ed. Cristiandad, Salamanca, 1997.

\*\*\*This book is an introductory manual. It presents the basic issues of anthropology from both a historical and systematic point of view. Recommendable for the synthesis it presents of the vision of the human person on the basis of the tradition of Christian thought in dialogue with contemporary positions.

Scheffczyk, Leo, *El Hombre Actual ante la Imagen Bíblica del Hombre*. Editorial Herder, Barcelona, 1967.

\*\*\*This book sets out to clarify the difficulties that the Biblical image of the human person poses for present-day people, so that they can recognize in it aspects that still have a great deal to say to enlighten their present existence.

Scheifler Amézaga, Xavier, *En busca del sentido de la vida*. México City, Trillas, 1991.

\*\*\*A book full of content, delightful and unpretentious... that could only have been written by someone who was not a psychologist by virtue of his professional status, but rather from

his experience and from his love and respect for life. (J. Lafarga). Highly recommended.

Schokel, L. y Sicre Díaz, J.L., *Profetas*. Ediciones Cristiandad, S.L., Madrid, 1980.

Segundo, Juan Luis, S.J., *Teología Abierta para el Laico Adulto*. Ediciones Carlos Lohlé, Buenos Aires, 1968.

\*\*This book contains a series of theological studies that put central tenets of the faith in dialogue with secular culture. The author seeks to engage the secular adult, that is to say, the person who is reflective, critical and committed in faith to worldly realities.

Teilhard de Chardin, Pierre, *El Fenómeno Humano*. Taurus Ediciones, S.A., Madrid, 1974.

\*\*\*The author presents his thoughts about the origin and evolution of human beings. He looks closely at what makes the human species distinctive, and the meaning of its appearance and its consciousness.

Teilhard de Chardin, Pierre, *La Visión del Pasado*. Taurus Ediciones, S.A., Madrid, 1966.

\*\*\*This work offers a philosophical and theological reflection on the development of the human species from its first appearance up to the present day. On the basis of humanity's current situation, the book looks at the possible routes it might take in the future.

Torres Queiruga, A., *Recuperar la Creación*. Sal Terrae, 1995.

\*\*\*Interesting due to its extraordinarily positive tone.

Tresmontant, Claude, *Ensayo sobre el Pensamiento Hebreo*. Taurus Ediciones, Madrid, 1962.

\*\*\*This is one of the few books that try to offer a systematic presentation of the specific features of the way of thinking and the ideas about reality that guide people's actions in the Bible. The study focuses more on the philosophical aspect than the theological.

Tresmontant, Claude, *La Doctrina Moral de los Profetas de Israel*. Tauris Ediciones, S.A., Madrid, 1962.

\*\*\*With the same intention as in the previous work, the author

examines what could be considered the ethical thought of the prophets of Israel as a doctrinal corpus for guiding real-life decisions.

Vidal, Marciano, *Para conocer la ética cristiana*. Verbo Divino, Navarra, 1989.

\*\*\*Complete and balanced overview of Moral Theology, fully updated. The issues and solutions that the author proposes are grounded in Scripture, the teachings of the Church tradition and the findings of the human sciences.

Von Rad, Gerhard, *El Libro del Génesis*. Ediciones Sígueme, Salamanca, 1977.

\*\*\*This is one of the most solid works of Biblical exegesis on the first book of the Bible. The author uses commentaries to show the structure and untangle the meaning of key passages from the Book of Genesis.

Von Rad, Gerhard, *Teología del Antiguo Testamento*. Ediciones Sígueme, Salamanca, 1978.

\*\*\*In this two-volume work, the author undertakes a wide-ranging and systematic study of Old Testament theology. The development of Israel's faith is examined in each stage of its historical development and reflection.

Wilhelm, Arnold, *Persona, carácter y personalidad*. Ed. Herder, Barcelona, 1975.

\*\*\*Written from a psychological perspective, this book takes a special interest in consciousness and examines the features of language. It highlights the problem of education and upbringing.

Zubiri, Xavier, *Sobre el hombre*. Alianza Edit., Madrid, 1986.

\*\*\*This work contains the great Basque philosopher's mature positions on human reality. In an original style, the author describes the constitutive structures of the human person, of his or her reality as a person, and of his or her moral dimension. In the second part, the author analyzes the genetic constitution of human reality in the different stages of life. Highly recommended as an in-depth reference work, particularly for its focus on the unity of the human person.

Zubiri, Xavier, *Siete ensayos de Antropología*. Ed. Universidad de Bogotá, Bogotá, 1978.

\*\*\*The essay entitled *El origen del hombre* makes quite a complete and profound consideration of current scientific data that support the theory of evolution. The author tries to explain the meaning of evolution from a philosophical perspective.