



13. Nicodemus. “How can a man be born when he is old?” (Jn 3:4)

Wednesday, 8 June 2022

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Among the most relevant elderly characters in the Gospels is Nicodemus — one of the Jewish leaders — who, wanting to know Jesus, went to him at night, although in secret (cf. *Jn 3:1-21*). In the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, the core of Jesus’ revelation and of his redemptive mission emerges, when he says, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (v. 16).

Jesus says to Nicodemus that in order to “see the kingdom of God”, one needs to be “born anew” from above (cf. v. 3). This does not mean starting over from birth, repeating our coming into the world, hoping that a new reincarnation will re-open our chance at a better life. This repetition makes no sense. Indeed, it would empty all meaning from the life we have lived, erasing it as if it were a failed experiment, an expired and lost value. No, this is not the rebirth that Jesus speaks of. It is something else. This life is precious in God’s eyes — it identifies us as creatures loved tenderly by Him. This “born anew” that allows us to “enter” the kingdom of God is a generation in the Spirit, a passage through the waters toward the promised land of a creation reconciled with the love of God. It is a rebirth from above with the grace of God. It is not being reborn physically another time.

Nicodemus misunderstands this birth and calls it into question using old age as evidence of its impossibility: human beings inevitably age, the dream of an eternal youth permanently retreats, decline is the destiny of any birth in time. How can he imagine a destination that takes the form of birth? This is how Nicodemus thinks and he cannot find a way to understand Jesus’ words. What exactly is this rebirth?

Nicodemus' objection is very instructive for us. We can, in fact, turn it upside down, in the light of Jesus' word, in the discovery of a mission proper to old age. Indeed, being old is not only not an obstacle to the being born anew that Jesus speaks of, but it becomes the opportune time to illuminate it, releasing it from the misunderstanding of a lost hope. Our epoch and our culture, which reveal a worrisome tendency to consider the birth of a child as a simple matter of the biological production and reproduction of the human being, cultivate the myth of eternal youth as a desperate obsession with an incorruptible body. Because old age is — in many ways — despised. Because it bears the undeniable evidence of the end of this myth, that wants us to return to our mother's womb to return with an ever young body.

Technology is fascinated by this myth in every way. While awaiting the defeat of death, we can keep the body alive with medicine and cosmetics which slow down, hide, erase old age. Naturally, well-being is one thing, feeding the myth is another. There is no denying, however, that the confusion between the two is creating a certain mental confusion in us. To confuse well-being with feeding the myth of eternal youth. Much is done to always have this youth: a lot of make-up, many surgical interventions to appear young. The words of a wise Italian actress, [Anna] Magnani, come to mind, when they told her she had to remove her wrinkles, she said, "No, don't touch them! It took so many years to have them — don't touch them!". That is it: wrinkles are a sign of experience, a sign of life, a sign of maturity, a sign of having made a journey. Do not touch them to become young, that your face might look young. What matters is the entire personality; it's the heart that matters, and the heart holds on to the youth of good wine — the more it ages the better it is.

Life in our mortal flesh is beautifully "unfinished", like certain works of art precisely due to their incompleteness have a unique charm. Because life down here is an "initiation", not the fulfilment. We come into the world just like this, like real people, like people who advance in age but who are always real. But life in our mortal flesh is too small a space and time to keep it intact and to bring to fulfilment in the world's time the most precious part of our existence. Jesus says that faith, which welcomes the evangelical proclamation of the kingdom of God to which we are destined, has an extraordinary primary effect. It enables us to "see" the kingdom of God. We become capable of truly seeing the many signs of the approximation of our hope of fulfilment for that which in our life bears the sign of being destined for God's eternity.

The signs are those of evangelical love illuminated by Jesus in many ways. And if we can “see” them, we can also “enter” into the kingdom through the passage of the Spirit through the waters that regenerate. Old age is the condition granted to many of us in which the miracle of this birth anew can be intimately assimilated and rendered credible for the human community. It does not communicate a nostalgia for birth in time, but love for our final destination. In this perspective, old age has a unique beauty — we are journeying toward the Eternal. No one can return to their mother’s womb, not even using its technological and consumerist substitute. This does not give wisdom; this does not provide a journey that has been accomplished; this is artificial. It would be sad, even if it were possible. The elderly person moves ahead; the elderly person journeys towards the destination, towards God’s heaven; the elderly person journeys with the wisdom of lived experience. Old age, therefore, is a special time of freeing the future from the technocratic illusion of a biological and robotic survival, especially because it opens one to the tenderness of the creative and generative womb of God. I would like to emphasize this word here – the tenderness of the elderly. Watch how a grandfather or a grandmother looks at his or her grandchildren, how they caress their grandchildren – that tenderness, free of any human trial, that has conquered the trials of life and is able to give love freely, the loving nearness of one person to others. This tenderness opens the door to understanding God’s tenderness. Let us not forget that God’s Spirit is closeness, compassion and tenderness. This is what God is like, he knows how to caress. And old age helps us understand this aspect of God which is tenderness. Old age is the special time of freeing the future from the technocratic illusion, it is the time of God’s tenderness that creates, creates a path for all of us.

May the Spirit grant us the re-opening of this spiritual — and cultural — mission of old age that reconciles us with being born anew. When we think of old age like this, we can say — why does this throwaway culture decide to throw out the elderly, considering them useless? The elderly are the messengers of the future, the elderly are the messengers of tenderness, the elderly are the messengers of the wisdom of lived experience. Let us move forward and watch the elderly.