

GOD'S GLORY SHINES ON THE FACE OF MAN

FROM THE GOSPEL OF LIFE (EVANGELIUM VITAE), 34–36

LIFE IS ALWAYS A GOOD. THIS IS AN INSTINCTIVE PERCEPTION and a fact of experience, and man is called to grasp the profound reason why this is so.

Why is life a good? This question is found everywhere in the Bible, and from the very first pages it receives a powerful and amazing answer. The life which God gives man is quite different from the life of all other living creatures, inasmuch as man, although formed from the dust of the earth (cf. Gen 2:7, 3:19; Job 34:15; Ps 103:14; 104:29), is a manifestation of God in the world, a sign of his presence, a trace of his glory (cf. Gen 1:26-27; Ps 8:6). This is what Saint Irenaeus of Lyons wanted to emphasize in his celebrated definition: “Man, living man, is the glory of God.”¹ Man has been given a sublime dignity, based on the intimate bond which unites him to his Creator: in man there shines forth a reflection of God himself.

The Book of Genesis affirms this when, in the first account of creation, it places man at the summit of God’s creative activity, as its crown, at the culmination of a process which leads from indistinct chaos to the most perfect of creatures. Everything in creation is ordered to man and everything is made subject to him: “Fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over...every living thing” (1:28); this is God’s command to the man and the woman. A similar message is found also in the other account of creation: “The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it” (Gen 2:15). We see here a clear affirmation of the primacy of man over things; these are made subject to him and entrusted to his responsible care, whereas for no reason can he be made subject to other men and almost reduced to the level of a thing.

In the biblical narrative, the difference between man and other creatures is shown above all by the fact that only the creation of man is presented as the result of a special decision on the part of God, a deliberation to establish a particular and specific bond with the Creator: “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness” (Gen 1:26).

The life which God offers to man is a gift by which God shares something of himself with his creature.

...The divine origin of this spirit of life explains the perennial dissatisfaction which man feels throughout his days on earth. Because he is made by God and bears within himself an indelible imprint of God, man is naturally drawn to God. When he heeds the deepest yearnings of the heart, every man must make his own the words of truth expressed by Saint Augustine: “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”²

How very significant is the dissatisfaction which marks man’s life in Eden as long as his sole point of reference is the world of plants and animals (cf. Gen 2:20). Only the appearance of the woman, a being who is flesh of his flesh and bone of his bones (cf. Gen 2:23), and in whom the spirit of God the Creator is also alive, can satisfy the need for interpersonal dialogue, so vital for human existence. In the other, whether man or woman, there is a reflection of God himself, the definitive goal and fulfillment of every person.

“What is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?” the Psalmist wonders (Ps 8:4). Compared to the immensity of the universe, man is very small, and yet this very contrast reveals his greatness: “You have made him little less than a god, and crown him with glory and honor” (Ps 8:5). The glory of God shines on the face of man.

...All who commit themselves to following Christ are given the fullness of life: the divine image is restored, renewed and brought to perfection in them. God’s plan for human beings is this, that they should “be conformed to the image of his Son” (Rom 8:29). Only thus, in the splendor of this image, can man be freed from the slavery of idolatry, rebuild lost fellowship and rediscover his true identity. ■

1 “Gloria Dei vivens homo”: *Adversus Haereses*, IV, 20, 7: S Ch 100/2, 648-649.

2 Confessions, I, 1: CCL 27, 1.



Pope St. John Paul II on his Encyclical *The Gospel of Life* (1995): “...[it] is meant to be a precise and vigorous reaffirmation of the value of human life and its inviolability, and at the same time, a pressing appeal addressed to each and every person in the name of God: respect, protect, love and serve life, every human life! Only in this direction will you find justice, development, true freedom, peace and happiness!”