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Man and woman, created and redeemed, called to communion

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The mystery of the human being and of the twofold development as man-woman is a central theme of biblical revelation. Especially in the origin accounts of the first chapters of the book of Genesis, is revealed the profound meaning of human reality, God's original project which constitutes the person, man and woman, in their truest dimension and in the fullness of their identity.

The text of *Gen* 2 will therefore be the focus of our intervention, as the obligatory reference for every biblical reflection on humankind.¹

This is an origin account which, as such, is not intended as an historical reconstruction of the temporal beginnings of the world and of humanity but rather as revealing for the believer the fundamental structure of the human being and its deepest significance.

The text of *Gen* 2 takes up, although along different lines, the theme of *Gen* 1, the first creation account.² (In both chapters, God is presented as Creator of all things, and the human being is seen as summit of the whole divine work of creation, centre of the world and destined to rule over it.

Let us look, then, at the most significant elements in this anthropological vision offered in the biblical text.

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¹ For the first chapters of the book of Genesis, see the classic works of G. von RAD, *Das erste Buch Moses: Genesis*, Göttingen 1972 and C. WESTERMARK, *Genesis*, BK I, E. Neukirchen 1974 (with an ample bibliography). For anthropological development, see M. NAVARRO, *Barro y aliento: Evolución y antropología teológica de Génesis 2-3*, *Biblioteca de Teología* 32, Madrid 1993; A. WÉNIG, *L'homme biblique: Anthropologie et éthique dans le Premier Testament*, Paris 1995, 29-58.

² *Gen* 1 and *Gen* 2 are related texts, in close relation to one another, and yet quite distinct, belonging to different eras and to two different story forms: the first closer to the creation myths, the second to the myths of origin. See E. STROMBALIS, "Gen 2:4, Restructuring a *lexis abstrusa*", *ZAW* 104 (1992): 163-177.

1. The human being and its mystery

A first important fact emerging from the Genesis account is the mysterious and, in a way, paradoxical nature of man.¹ The text of *Gen* 2:7-8 says, in fact: "Yahweh God shaped man from the soil of the ground, and blew the breath of life into his nostrils, and man became a living being. Yahweh God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man he had fashioned"; and then, in verse 15: "Yahweh God took the man and settled him in the garden of Eden to cultivate and take care of it".

The human being is presented here as God's first work, for which the garden is planted, the world with its wonders, entrusted to man. A garden described as a wonderful place, rich, with luxuriant life: a great number of trees, pleasant to the sight and good for food; the four rivers, guaranteeing fertility and abundance of life, the riches of the soil, with gold, fragrant resin, onyx stone (cf. vv. 9-14). A paradisaical reality, of which man is lord, because it is a world entrusted to his care, which he must keep and cultivate, and so make fruitful, alive, prolonging within it God's work of creation.

The sphere of man's dominion seems total; he can dispose of the garden and is lord also of the other beings inhabiting it, because he gives a name to the animals God creates for him (cf. vv. 19-20). It is well known that, in the biblical text, to give a name means to know, to possess, to dominate. In the Semitic world, in fact, the name is not merely a convention used to indicate a particular reality: it encloses the truth, the deep meaning of the reality indicated. So, to impose a name on something (and on someone) means to possess its secret and assign it a destiny.² Finally, what man does in giving a name to the animals has in it something divine.³

Man, therefore, is unquestioned lord, minister of God in the world, sovereign of creation. And yet, he also is a creature, and a creature made of the earth, just like the animals over which he

¹ We use the term 'man' here in its generic sense of 'human person', without any specific sexual determination. When we want to refer to man as a masculine being, this will be explicitly indicated.

² For the meaning and function of the name in the Old Testament, see H. Cazet-Lucas, "Noms" in *Dictionnaire de Théologie Biblique*, X. Léon-Dufour (ed.), Torino 1971, 764-766.

³ Cf. *Gen* 1:5, 8, 10; *Jb* 40:26; *Is* 3:24-35; *Ps* 147:4.

rules and to which he gives a name.⁴ To be still more exact, *Gen* 2 affirms that he is shaped "from the soil of the ground" (v. 7). So, not only "made with dust", but still more radically "made of dust";⁵ identified with it, able to be reduced to it, in a situation that is radically creatural and totally contingent. Man, a mortal and ephemeral being, is dust of the earth, and to dust returns, because from dust he was taken (*Gen* 3:19; cf. also *Ps* 90:3; 103:14; 104:29; 146:4; *Job* 10:8-9).

This then is the paradoxical mystery of which man is bearer and by which he is constituted: lord of the earth, he is earth;⁶ ruler of the world, he is scattered like dust; lord of the garden, he is made like the animals, but vivified by the divine breath, he breathes with the breath of God.

The approach is the same in *Gen* 1; man is created in the image and likeness of God and must have dominion over the earth and over every living being; but he is created in the same day as the beasts of the earth and shares with them food and part of the blessing (cf. vv. 24-31). In this way is affirmed man's creaturalness, and at the same time, his extraordinary, unrepeatable dignity.

The synthesis of this twofold dimension of the human mystery is contained, according to the account in *Gen* 2, in the command man receives from God in the garden. The text is as follows: "You are free to eat of all the trees in the garden. But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you are not to eat; for, in the day you eat of that, you are doomed die" (16-17).

This is a commandment which is, in reality, a gift of truth made to man, a revelation of his identity, and an offer of communion with God. The "knowledge of good and evil" implies, in fact,

⁴ The terminology used for the creation of man and of the animals is substantially the same: for both is used the verb *yāq*, which means to 'form, mould', and the noun *'ālamāh* 'earth'. As we shall see immediately, for man is added the lesser term *'ādam*, he is not only formed from the earth (*yāq mīnāh 'ālamāh*), but is formed as dust from the earth *yāq 'āpar mīnāh 'ālamāh*.

⁵ The noun *'āpār*, dust, is used, in our verse, absolutely, and so can be interpreted either as an accusative of means ('formed with dust'), or in apposition ('formed dust'). Both readings are possible and can be maintained, respecting in this way the ambiguity present in the text.

⁶ We should point out the play of sound between the term *'ādam* (man) and *'ālamāh* (earth), which serves to stress the relationship and likeness between the two realities.

full and total possession of all reality in all its dimensions." But this is a divine prerogative, which man cannot take for himself through an assimilation that is symbolically represented here by the act of eating. To eat of that tree would mean becoming the origin of everything, of good and evil, of happiness and unhappiness, of life and death; ultimately, it would mean being God.

In this way, God's command, by confronting man with his limitation, enables him to accept fully his reality as a creature and to open himself for the gift of otherness. It is only by accepting not to be God that it is possible to become truly human beings, in communion with the divine. Only in this way, in conformity with one's own truth, is it possible to be happy and to live to the full.

As a matter of fact, the account we are given speaks of two particular trees. Verse 9 reads: "From the soil, Yahweh God caused to grow every kind of tree, enticing to look at and good to eat, with the *tree of life* in the middle of the garden, and the *tree of the knowledge of good and evil*". The inspired text, therefore, in its final version, the one that is normative for us, presents the tree of life alongside the tree of knowledge, and it is only for the latter that the prohibition is stated.¹⁰

The tree of life is, therefore, at man's disposal; man can have free access to it, provided there is full acceptance of man's own radical dependence on God. In other words, man can eat of the tree of life, provided he accepts the truth about himself as creature and so does not reach out to gather the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

Obedience to the divine command becomes in this way the path of life for man; it belongs to man but only if he does not take

¹⁰ In this expression we have a 'merism', a typically Semitic stylistic phenomenon; mentioning the two opposite extremes of a reality indicates the totality in all its extension. For instance, the expression 'heaven and earth' is used to indicate the whole cosmos, or 'young and old' to mean the whole population.

¹¹ The problem of the presence of the two trees in the Genesis text has been the subject of much debate among scholars, who generally solve it by referring to different traditions which came together in the same narration (cf. in particular the excursus of G. WESTERMANN, *Genesis*, 288-292, with ample bibliography). However, the text as it has come down to us, has kept the distinction between the two trees, which we must, therefore, now take into account.

it for himself, but receives it as a gift from the One who is its true and only origin. In reality — and this is the wonderful, paradoxical mystery — man is truly lord of creation only if he accepts not to be its Lord and creator.

2. Man and woman

The complex and mysterious human reality of which we have been speaking is referred, in our text, to the term *'ādām*. This Hebrew word generally signifies humanity, the human race in a collective sense, or the individual insofar as belonging to the human race, without any specific sexual characterization.¹² In a few texts it is used also as a proper name, to indicate Adam, the first man; in this sense it is used only for the first time in *Gen* 4:25.¹³

So, in our text of *Gen* 2, *'ādām* has still a generic sense, and is used to indicate the human person, not man as a masculine individual. It is the human being who is earth and lord of the garden, who gives a name to the animals and who receives the command not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. And it is about this still indifferentiated being that God says: "It is not good that the man should be alone" (cf. v. 18).

"It is not good", in Hebrew *lō' tōb*, reminds the reader of the *lō' tōb* repeated so many times in *Gen* 1 to say that God saw "that it was good" (cf. *Gen* 1:4,10,12,18,21,25,31). Creation is all good, all beautiful, but this human being, spoken of in *Gen* 2, has not yet come to completion; there is still something lacking for the work to be truly good and beautiful. There is not yet otherness within humanity; the interpersonal relationship is lacking. There must be an end to the solitude.

And it is then that God continues with his work, bringing it to perfection, creating the good, complete, definitive human being: man and woman. "Then, Yahweh God made the man fall into a deep sleep. And while he was asleep, he took one of his ribs and

¹² On the term, cf. G. WESTERMANN, "*ādām*, Mensch" in *THAT*, 3, 41-57; F. MAAS, "*ādām*", in *TWAT*, 1, 81-84.

¹³ Cf. WESTERMANN, *ibid.*, 45, and the study by D. BOUQUET, "L'homme ou bien Adam?", *ETR* 61 (1992) 323-327.

closed the flesh up again forthwith. Yahweh God fashioned the ribs he had taken from the man into a woman, and brought her to the man. And the man (the man said): "This one at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she is to be called woman, because she was taken out of man" (vv. 21-23).

These verses are not so much a new account of creation — that of the woman after that of the man —, but rather, the continuation and final phase of one single narration, which concerns the creation of the human person. The narrative sequence should not, therefore, be interpreted as if first there was the creation of the male being and then, in a second phase, that of the female being; it must rather be understood as one unique and great creative event, the creation of the human being, which develops with its full meaning and comes to completion only when it is revealed as a differentiated human being: man and woman.⁸

In this sense, we could say that, in *Gen 2*, we have in narrative form what is affirmed in a concise, and almost proverbial form, in *Gen 1:27*: "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created *him*; male and female he created *them*" (cf. also *5:1-2*). As we see, it is a matter, not of two distinct moments of creation, but of the affirmation that this man created by God exists as such only in the man-woman difference.

In *Gen 2* the narration proceeds in specific modes and using categories that savour of myth and that are certainly conditioned by the time and by the social and cultural contingencies of the period in which they have been used; but the important thing is the message that emerges. Let us see its essential elements.

First and foremost we must note the detail of the last phase of the creative act in which, according to the narrative, God uses the already formed body of the human being, of *'ādām*. This fact stresses the equality between the two resulting beings, man and woman, and their irreplaceable relationship. It is not a matter of a new act of creation, and so of a new being, made with other earth, as de-

⁸ Cf. G. WESTERMARK, *Genesis*, 316, with reference to 2:23: "...bedeutet die Erschließung nicht von der Erschließung der Frau, nicht von der Entzerrung der Liebe der Geschlechter zueinander, sie handelt von der Erschließung des Menschen, die zu Miteinander von Mann und Frau zu ihrem Ziel kommt".

scribed, for example, with reference to the animals, but always of the one same being which now becomes two.

The relation between the man and the woman is therefore very close and indissoluble. Each is "side, flank" for the other,⁹ and so, mutually, a "correspondent aid, adequate, homologous",¹⁰ in a relationship of absolutely irreplaceable complementarity.

This couple, created in this way, must, however, recognize one another. In our narration, the woman is brought to the man, to this *'ādām*, different now from before, because differentiated, recognizing himself as a man (male) when he recognizes the other as woman.

The exclamation of v. 23 is significant: "And *'ādām* said: This one at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; ¹¹ she is to be called woman (*'iššā*), because she was taken out of man (*'āḏ*)". He, *'ādām*, can now define himself as *'āḏ* because he calls the other *'iššā*. The two names, by their sound, express the relation, the reference mutually to one another, giving the episode a particular significance. The man, in fact, gives the name to the woman, but it is a name that comes from his own, and even one which allows him to pronounce his own name. As distinct from the name given to the animals, this new name makes it possible, in acceptance of true otherness, to recognize the other as equal to oneself.

In the exultant cry of recognition, *'ādām* speaks for the first time and, in the differentiation, becomes definitively *'āḏ* and *'iššā*: recognizing and naming the other, the man discovers and recognizes himself.

In this way, the creation of the human being reaches completion and reveals its full meaning: the man of *Gen 2* is a being radically defined by relationship; in a perfectly finished state, he is also incomplete, in need of the other, being structurally called to communion.

⁹ The Hebrew noun *šēfēl*, usually translated 'side' on the basis also of the ancient version, has a more general meaning of 'flank, side', with reference either to man or to things, as, for example, *Gen 48* (cf. *Ex 25:12*), the sanctuary (cf. *Ex 26:20*), a mountain (cf. *2 Sam 16:13*).

¹⁰ For the expression *šer hōwēgōš*, cf. M. DE MEYER, "Une *šer hōwēgōš* qui correspond". L'exégèse de *Gen 2:18-24* in the writings of the Old Testament of Judaism and of the New Testament", *Bib 5* (1977) 329-352; J.-L. SICA, "Je vois lui faire un *šer hōwēgōš* qui soit son homologue" (*Gen 2:18*) À propos du terme *šer hōwēgōš*, *Bib 65* (1984) 233-238.

¹¹ The expression "flesh of my flesh and bone of my bones" is a formula expressing covenant, communion, and implying recognition of belonging to the same reality (cf. *Gen 29:13-14*; *2 Sam 5:1*; *13:12-14*).

3. Called to communion

The final addition, concluding our narrative, returns to the earlier themes, opening up their fulfilment in history. V. 24 reads: "This is why a man (*אִישׁ*) leaves his father and mother and becomes attached to his wife (*אִשׁוֹ*), and they become one flesh". The human being created by God is called to relationship and constituted by it. The man and the woman are destined to find one another, are called to a fruitful union which expresses their reciprocal need and mutual self-giving. The two are called to become one again: the communion, in equality, of the diverse becomes, in this way, the new flesh, in which they can each find and fulfil themselves, each lost in the other in an unconditioned acceptance, consumed in fidelity and in a love without reserve.

The narrative of *Gen 2* is concluded in this way,⁹ presenting for us God's plan of life for his creature. It is, we might say, God's "dream" for man, God's original design, which the human being is called to fulfil in order to reach the fullness of the truth of being human.

But the concrete reality of man in history, the man we know by experience is different. God's plan in and for man, has been changed by sin, by an opposing human project in which, instead of accepting the divine gift, the hand is stretched out to take the fruit which, in the illusory falsehood of temptation, should make man equal to God. And so begins a tragic history of division, homicidal violence, total folly (cf. *Gen 3 ff*). Communion seems to be at an end, split by an apparently irreparable break; love is painfully wounded by overpowering oppression; life bears radically the mark of death.

And yet, God's plan goes forward, it has not been defeated; and man — incapable, weak, sinful — is taken up into a new, redemptive dimension of humanity. As the Letter to the Galatians

⁹ Verse 25 ("Now, both of them were naked, the man and his wife, but they felt no shame before each other") is the link with the chapter that follows: the elements of nakedness and shame will play a decisive part in the story of the original sin. This transitional function of the verse is also underlined in the Hebrew text by a play of sound: the man and the woman are naked (*עֶרְוָה*: 2:25) and will lose, in contrast to the serpent, the most subtle (*חָיָה*: 3:1) of the animals.

tells us: "When the completion of the time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born a subject of the Law, to redeem the subjects of the Law, so that we could receive adoption as sons" (*Gal 4:4-5*).

In the Son of God made man, God's 'dream' becomes reality. In Jesus, the new and definitive Adam, the sin is pardoned, the break healed; death is finally conquered. And in Him and with Him, all human beings can find again their own visage as creatures, made of the earth but in God's image; called, in radical obedience, to life and to communion.

And when this happens, the world becomes again a garden. Like the garden of Eden, planted by God. Like that of the bridegroom and the bride in the Song of Songs. Like the garden near Golgotha, where, in front of the empty tomb, Mary Magdalene recognizes the Lord, the bridegroom, as he calls her by name (cf. *Jn 20*). With the victory over death, man receives his definitive name and is finally restored to his true dignity in a risen life of communion and of peace.

This is the 'dream of God' that Jesus comes to fulfil. In it, redeemed humanity receives its definitive aspect, while accepting a gift which takes man beyond death, because it makes man capable of loving, and so transforms death into a gift of life. Because "no one can have greater love than to lay down his life for his friends" (*Jn 15:13*).