

The Texts of the Convivium

“PREDESTINATION OF ALL MEN IN CHRIST “: WHAT COULD THIS MEAN, EXACTLY?”

I have collected a series of expressions like the following from a treatise dedicated to theology of our time. They are all referred to Jesus Christ and extremely recurrent in the writings dedicated to these themes.

It is precisely about a *divine plan revealed in Christ*, of the *original intention of all men in Christ*, of a *call in Christ of all men*. Furthermore, it is about a *redemption* and of a *salvific plan in Christ*, of an *incorporation* in him; and, once again in him, of a *completion*.

None of these expressions should lead us to thinking that the ultimate end which God pursues is the exaltation of Jesus as such, of his human person in its singularity, in exclusive terms.

Jesus is, par excellence, the Saviour, the Prophet, the Master, the Lord, the King; however, this does not mean that he comes down among us “to be served”. He only comes “to serve”. He who is the greatest, the most important, the head, must be everybody’s servant (Mk 10, 41-45; Lk 22, 24-27). Jesus emphasises this before he begins the last supper, by washing his disciples’ feet (Jn 13, 1-16). In the same way as the divine Father gave him a kingdom, Jesus calls his disciples to partake in this kingdom of his, to reign with him (Lk 22, 28-30).

Just a moment before, he had said to his disciples: “You are those who have continued with me in my trials; and I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom, that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Lk 22, 28-30).

Not only the apostles will be associated to the kingdom, but also all those who will have welcomed their preaching by converting themselves.

Having retired after supper to pray, Christ asks his Father that with Jesus all may fulfil that perfect union which binds the Father to the Son: “I do not pray”, he says, “for these [apostles] only, but also those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one; even as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory which you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me “ (Jn 17, 20-23).

I think that this *ut unum sint* (“so that they are one only thing”) has a much stronger meaning than that which is attributed to such words when one wishes the ecumenical union of Christians.

The concept of this perfect union which has to be established between Christ and the disciples ascended to his same level is repeated with the utmost clarity both in the Revelation and the letters of the apostle Paul.

The image of the throne from which the faithful disciple will reign together with the Lord, with strictly analogous power, returns in the Revelation.

The author of this conclusive book of the New Testament represents the ultimate destination of the Christian martyrs in this way: “Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom judgement was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who

had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the word of God, and who had not worshipped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life, and reigned with Christ a thousand years” (Rev 20, 4).

In order to emphasise the close union and equality that are established between Jesus and his faithful disciple, in analogy to the union and equality that is between Jesus and his Father, one can mention what the Son of man says to the angel of the church of Laodicea: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. He who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne” (Rev 3, 20-22).

As far as he is concerned, the apostle Paul says that in the end “the saints will judge the world” (1 Cor 6, 2). He defines them as “heirs of God, fellow heirs of Christ” (Rom 8, 17). And again: “predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren” (Rom 8, 29). The Lord Jesus Christ “who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body” (Phil 3, 20).

Here we are, then: “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit” (2 Cor 3, 18).

In addressing the Colossians, Paul hopes with all his heart that they “may have all the riches of assured understanding and the knowledge of God’s mystery, of Christ, in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col 2, 2-3).

He writes to the Ephesians in this way: “...That you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph 3, 18-19).

As far as the Apostle is concerned, Christ is “the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all” (Eph 1, 22-23). Therefore the imperative is “hold fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together with its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God” (Col 2, 19).

This is how the building of this collective body is accomplished, “until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4, 13). And we, “speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together with every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love” (Eph 4, 15-16).

A careful consideration of these passages of the apostles John and Paul should lead us to identifying the ultimate end of the history of salvation in the glorious advent, in the supreme exaltation, that is not so much of a monarch, but rather a *respublica* of saints who have all come together in the fullness of the incarnation of the Divine.

Such is the plan which Jesus dedicates himself to, for which he donates his whole self. Furthermore, it is the construction to which we are all invited to co-operate.

He goes before us on the journey of the Cross, but each one of us has to carry his cross and contribute to the purification of the common collective body. Having been baptised and with one’s own ascetic commitment each one dies to the sin and is buried together with Christ to rise up again with him (Rom 6, 1-12; Col 2, 12-15).

Each one of us is invited to the succession of Christ and his imitation. Each one of us is an *alter Christus* with his particular, different and very singular vocation. Humanism contributes to the construction of the kingdom of God in its various aspects, in the wide range of its forms of research and thought, of action and of creativity.

Christianity is a collective journey, which is extremely demanding for everybody, where Jesus goes before us and opens up the way for us.

Every saint is worthy of veneration for his merits, for the due gratitude we have for him and above all for that which, through him, is the manifestation of the divine Spirit.

Jesus is God Himself who becomes incarnate among us and therefore, besides being venerated, is to be worshipped. Now veneration and worship do not have to remain ends in themselves, they cannot exhaust our relation with the saint, with incarnate God. The man of God invites us to follow him.

In the face of the saint two attitudes can be given. One can join imitation to veneration, but one could only limit oneself to exclaiming: "What a great saint! I do not know how to imitate him, I will not even try to, but I venerate him and I pray to him". "What do you ask him to do for you? That he may help you to improve, to become more saint?" "How could I ask him something like this? I am definitely not cut out to be a saint, but I can pay him all honours. And I certainly pray to him, but for the things I really hold at heart, for my health and that of my loved ones. I especially invoke him if I am afflicted with an illness, so that he may cure me".

Here is a cult of the saint that finds expression in his image being hung up in the corner of the house which is made into a small domestic shrine. The cult of the saint could find another form in that of processions, where his statue, often his embalmed corpse, is carried around the town or transferred from one town to another where one wishes to see and touch it. The gratitude to the saint for a grace received could lead to pilgrimages to his sanctuary. People will bring him gifts to enrich his treasure and hang the *ex voto*: the crutches that are no longer needed, a *naif* small picture which represents the accident to remind one of the danger he was saved from.

These practices go back to extremely ancient pagan customs. On the contrary, the alternative consists of the intention and effort of imitating the saint's virtues, in all humbleness and with all the good will, not to emulate him but to make oneself his disciple.

This is what Jesus asks from us. I think that he, who was humiliated to the point of suffering the most agonising and ignominious torture for us, would not be very pleased at being carried around in processions with the musical band blaring, the mayor, the most disparate local authorities, carabinieri, hooded brothers who leave the pub for the church only once a year for this feast day, to contend for the privilege and prestige of carrying the "machine" on his shoulders.

It is what has well understood the religious person who, among all the possible images that can represent Jesus, prefers the crucifix, symbol of the total donation that Jesus made of himself until his death suffered in total degradation.

The glorification ensued is, in the end, of all of us, no longer servants nor subjects, but friends that Jesus has wished to associate to his eternal kingdom. It is the glorification of the entire people of God which, thanks to the total donation of himself of the incarnate God, will be promoted to a multitude of Men-God, to a collective Christ.