

Man Holds Key to Immortality

Following is the text of the pontiff's address at a recent general audience.

Today it is opportune to return once more to the meaning of man's original solitude, which emerges above all from the analysis of the so-called Yahwist text of Genesis 2. The biblical text enables us, as we have already seen in preceding reflections, to stress not



only consciousness of the human body (man is created in the visible world as a "body among bodies"), but also that of its meaning.

In view of the great consciousness of the biblical text, it is admittedly not possible to amplify this implication too much. It is certain, however, that here we touch upon the central problem of anthropology. Consciousness of the body seems to be identified in this case with the discovery of the complexity of one's own structure which, on the basis of philosophical anthropology, consists, in short, in the relationship between soul and body. The Yahwist narrative with its own language (that is, with its own terminology), expresses it by saying: "The Lord God formed man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being." And precisely this man, "a living being," distinguishes himself continually from all other living beings in the visible world.

The premise of man's distinguishing himself in this way is precisely the fact that only he is capable of "tilling the earth" and "subduing it." It can be said that the consciousness of "superiority," contained in the definition of humanity, is born right from the beginning on the basis of a typically human way or behavior. This consciousness brings with it a particular perception of the meaning of one's own body, emerging precisely from the fact that it falls to man to "till the earth" and "subdue it." All that would be impossible without a typically human intuition of the meaning of one's own body.

It seems necessary, then, to speak in the first place of this aspect, rather than of the problem of anthropological complexity in the metaphysical sense. If the original description of human consciousness, given by the Yahwist text, comprises, in the narrative as a whole, also the body, if it contains, as it were, the first testimony of the discovery of one's corporality (and even, as has been said, the perception of the meaning

of one's own body), all that is revealed not on the basis of any primordial metaphysical analysis, but on the basis of a concrete subjectivity of man that is quite clear.

Man is a subject not only because of his self-awareness and self-determination, but also on the basis of his own body. The structure of this body is such as to permit him to be the author of a truly human activity. In this activity the body expresses the person. It is, therefore, in all its materiality ("God formed man of dust from the ground"), almost penetrable and transparent, in such a way as to make it clear who man is (and who he should be) thanks to the structure of his consciousness and of his self-determination. On this there rests the fundamental perception of the meaning of one's own body, which cannot but be discovered when analyzing man's original solitude.

And here, with this fundamental understanding of the meaning of his own body, man, as subject of the ancient Covenant, is placed before the mystery of the tree of knowledge. "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." The original meaning of man's solitude is based on experience of the existence obtained from the Creator. This human existence is characterized precisely by subjectivity, which includes also the meaning of the body.

But could man, who, in his original consciousness, know exclusively the experience of existing and therefore of life, could man have understood the meaning of the words "you shall die?" Would he have been able to arrive at understanding the meaning of these words through the complex structure of life, given to him when "the Lord God . . . breathed into his nostrils the breath of life . . .?" It must be admitted that the word "die," a completely new one, appeared on the horizon of man's consciousness without his having ever experienced its reality, and that at the same time this word appeared before him as a radical antithesis of all that man had been endowed with.

Man heard for the first time the words "you shall die," without having any familiarity with them in his experience up to then. But on the other hand he could not but associate the meaning of death with that dimension of life which he had enjoyed up to then. The words of God-Yahweh addressed to man confirmed a dependence in existing, such as to make man

a limited being and, by his very nature, liable to non-existence.

These words raised the problem of death in a conditional way: "in the day that you eat of it you shall die" Man, who had heard these words, had to find their truth in the very interior structure of his own solitude. And, in short, it depended on him, on his decision and free choice, if, with solitude, he was to enter also the circle of the antithesis revealed to him by the Creator, together with the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and thereby to make his own the experience of dying and death.

Listening to the words of God-Yahweh, man should have understood that the tree of knowledge had roots not only in the "garden of Eden," but also in his humanity. He should have understood, furthermore, that that mysterious tree concealed within it a dimension of loneliness, hitherto unknown, with which the Creator had endowed him in the midst of the world of living beings, to which he, man — in the presence of the Creator himself — had "given names," in order to arrive at the understanding that none of them was similar to him.

When, therefore, the fundamental meaning of his body had already been established through the distinction from all other creatures, when it had thereby become clear that the "invisible" determines man more than the "visible", then there was presented to him the alternative closely and directly connected by God with the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The alternative between death and immortality, which emerges from Genesis 2:17, goes beyond the essential meaning of man's body, since it grasps the eschatological meaning not only of the body, but of humanity itself, distinguished from all living beings, from "bodies." This alternative concerns, however, in a quite particular way, the body created from "dust from the ground."

In order not to prolong this analysis any longer, we will merely note that the alternative between death and immortality, has also a fundamental meaning for the whole theology of the body.

With this observation we conclude for the present our reflections on the meaning of man's original solitude. This observation, which emerges in a clear and penetrating way from the texts of the Book of Genesis, induces reflection both on the texts and on man, who is perhaps too little conscious of the truth that concerns him, and which is already contained in the first chapters of the Bible.

More Opinions

Is Greeley Our Nader?

Editor:

With a Parochial background, it is logical that I would associate priests with being messengers of the Good News. We, the flock, look to the clergy for spiritual guidance and direction. I am prayerfully grateful for the priests who have helped nurture my faith and that of so many others.

In my growth as a Christian, I've become more sensitive to the impressions and reactions others may have to the teachings and practices of our Church and those who guide us. It was with this inclination that I listened to the guest appearances this Fall on TV, on two separate occasions, of Father Andrew Greeley. The first occasion was the Phil Donahue Show and the second, was after national TV news coverage of our beloved Pope's visit. I am not new to Father Greeley's style and "message." Is he Catholic America's answer to Ralph Nader? I believe in

free speech, but what a waste of valuable TV time that could have helped spread the Good News instead of bad news as it seemed Father Greeley was bent on doing. Will his message lead others to discover Jesus or turn them away?

I am not alone in saying that there are MANY Catholic Americans who DO want to follow our Pope, KNOWING that it is not easy to follow on a path paved not only with love but also sacrifice, discomfort, selflessness. Thank God for the chance for spiritual and physical growth that is possible. We welcome it. That is the Good News — that we can grow and change.

May God bless all of us with the grace to grow when our message to others no longer speaks of His Good News.

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Now's Time For Witness

Editor:

It is my belief that there are millions of women today who find it an extraordinary privilege just to stand quietly at the foot of Our Lord's Cross, with His Mother, learning "obedience" from His example. Obedience unto death. Sacrifice. Love.

By our generous, wholehearted, united obedience to Pope John Paul II, we men and women who profess Catholicism can NOW give a living witness to peoples of all faiths, that we do in deed believe this man to be Jesus Christ's chosen successor to Peter.

The time is now, we have only one short lifetime in which to give a living witness to our faith.

Love to all the members of our universal church community and to our leader John Paul II.

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Word for Sunday

By Father Albert Shamon

The World Still Needs The Truth

Sunday Readings: (R3) Jn. 18:33-37. (R1) Dn. 7:13-14. (R2) Rv. 1:5-8.

The last Sunday of the Church year celebrates the Feast of Christ the King. "I am a king," Jesus told Pilate. Then He explained what kind of king—"the reason why I came into the world is to testify to the truth." He came into the world as a king of truth. His subjects would be all those "committed to the truth."

Look at the world into which Jesus had come. It was split into three main parts. Thus the title Pilate nailed to the cross of Christ, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews," was written in three languages— Greek, Latin and Hebrew. All these peoples claimed to be seeking the truth.

The Greeks sought it in philosophy, culture and art. In the time of Paul, Athenian philosophers

debated in the Areopagus about truth. Their architecture followed rigid laws as to proportion. Their Parthenon, for instance, would not have been a insisted on "the unities." They had "the line of beauty" for every feature of a statue, and the "tone of color" for each shade of the painter's picture. They even counted the digits, and called only the threes, sevens and tens perfect.

But when they came to conduct, they had no such thing as truth. When Aristides strove more and more for justice, they banished him. When Socrates got close to morality, they made him drink the hemlock.

The Romans, too, sought truth. They looked for it in inexorable law. They compelled human beings to become true by conformity to laws. The populace grew rigid and machine-like; the higher classes reacted with vice and ingenious forms of immorality. In the end they got nothing but a code of laws and phalanxes of soldiers to enforce them.

Finally, the Hebrews sought truth through ritual. They had Scripture, but exalted the letter above the

spirit. Then the "traditions" — their own human interpretations of God's laws — took precedence over everything. Their religious leaders displayed God's word on their foreheads but never carried it in their hearts; phylacteries took the place of principles. Hence the people became lip-worshippers — "This people honoreth Me with their lips, but their hearts are far from Me."

Into a world, therefore, that had not discovered truth, Jesus came. He came "to testify to the truth."

And two thousand years later, the world still has need of truth. Bigotry, prejudice and hatred still distort the truth. Not even the Supreme Court of the land is immune. Witness its iniquitous, Herod-like decree on abortion, and its denial of aid to private schools, prompted largely by bigotry and prejudice.

Man's inclination to error points to a need now, more than ever before, because of the mass media, for truth, for allegiance to One Who died, not because He claimed to be a King, but because He claimed to be the King of truth. In Him alone, Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews, rest the hopes of Twentieth Century man.

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