

June 9, 2002
Sunday of the Blind Man

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

In the biblical narrative of the creation, it is noteworthy that the original day of creation is not designated "the first day." it is called, rather, "one day" (yom 'ehad). Although this difference of expression in Genesis 1:5 has proved too subtle for virtually all biblical translations into modern languages, its recognized significance caused it to be maintained in the ancient versions, such as the Septuagint (hemera mia) and the Vulgate (dies unus). In addition, that difference of expression ("one day" instead of "first day") was the object of explicit discussion in nearly all ancient commentaries on Genesis 1:5, whether Jewish (e.g., Philo and Rashi) or Christian (e.g., Basil and Augustine).

In those classical comments on the text, moreover, we find the common assertion that the words "one day" served to elevate that day to something more than part of a sequence. It was "one," not "first." There is a profound reason why the original day of creation is appropriately called "one," whereas the second day is not appropriately called "two," nor the third day "three," and so forth.

The original day is "one" in a manner analogous to that number itself. "One" is not simply the numeral that precedes two in a sequence; it is, rather, the number out of which that second number comes. There is a formal disparity between one and the other numbers. One (to hen) is the font that determines the identity of two and the subsequent numbers. "one" is not just "first" as part of a sequence; it is what we call a principle, an arche. This is the nature of a principium, or arche.

For example, there is a parallel and corresponding proposition to be argued with respect to repentance, metanoia. Repentance is the arche of our return to God; it functions in the Christian life as the number "one" functions in arithmetic. It is not simply the "first" step of the Christian life, the gressus primus ante pares as it were. Repentance is, rather, the abiding and formative principle of the formation of the Christian heart. Repentance is not a step that we take with a view to getting past it. Although there is certainly progress to be made in the life of grace, all genuine progress is indicated by a renewal of repentance. A Christian does not "grow" in Christ by diminishing his attention to repentance.

Repentance is not supposed ever to wane but always to wax. True growth and authentic progress in Christ always imply growth and progress in repentance. Repentance is the Holy Spirit's dearest friend.

There are several very important inferences to be drawn from this premise of repentance as a principium of the life in Christ:

First, as the initial effect of grace, repentance is not of an order different from sanctity. This needs emphatically to be said, because for some few centuries now there has roamed abroad the fallacious theory that God's act by which we are justified remains external to us. This rather recent theory effectively separates repentance from sanctity, as though God would declare a man righteous without making him righteousness, pronounce him just without causing him to be a "saint," and convert him but with no new heart. Against this theory, the Bible indicates that conversion is not just an act of God; it is also an act of man's free will under the accepted influence of God's grace. Man's heart, his interior, is altered by repentance.

Second, because repentance is the free decision of man as well as the free gift of God, the grace of repentance, if not safeguarded, can be lost. Again, this truth has been obscured in recent centuries by an erroneous theory asserting that repentance, if genuine, cannot perish. However, a more complete reading of the Bible obliges us to say that the blessed assurance given us in Christ (cf. Romans 8:31-39) is no substitute for humility and vigilance. At no point in our Christian lives can we afford to forget that we must work out our salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12), with discipline lest we fall away (1 Corinthians 9:27).

"Therefore, let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (10:12).

Third, if repentance is a sustained constant in the life of grace, it is also repetitive. This repetition is both possible and required, not only for the daily shortcomings that befall us all, but also for those more serious infidelities that may even constitute apostasy. Once again, a fairly recent pernicious theory, interpreting the adjective "impossible" in Hebrews 6:4 in an excessively literal sense, has imagined that there is no return for a believer who has deliberately fallen from grace. This mischievous theory, however, is dashed to pieces by the biblical examples of such men as David and Peter.

Repentance is the non-negotiable, foundational constant of the life in Christ. However much God's saints differ from one another in style, tone, and emphasis, repentance is a grace and discipline -a principle- shared by them all.

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