



BETWEEN DIVINE WORD AND MORTAL FLESH

The Holy See's Pavilion at the Venice Biennale



It was 1982 and the Canadian literary critic Northrop Frye published his essay *The Great Code* which Einaudi translated into Italian in 1986: but the formula “great code” had been coined nearly two hundred years earlier by that original and eclectic Englishman, the painter, poet and engraver William Blake. As a meta-text for his creations, he had often used the Bible itself, the supreme iconographic and literary “code” adopted by Western artists for centuries. Participating for the first time at the Venice *Biennale d’Arte* in 2013, the Holy See wished ideally to refresh this bond which had become undone during the last century, generating a fruitless divorce between artistic research and that symbolic, narrative and thematic “lexicon”, the Hebrew-Christian Holy Scriptures (as defined by the French writer Paul Claudel).

“In the beginning was the *Lógos*/Word...”

In the 2013 edition we gave three different artists, as a free point of departure for their creations, the absolute *incipit* of that sacred text, the first eleven chapters of *Genesis* which portray creation, de-creation (sin and the flood) and re-creation with the coming of a new humanity, a new history and salvation. In the Bible that radical beginning of being and existing was entrusted to a transcendent “sonorous” event, the divine Word: “In the beginning God said: Let there be light! And there was light” (1:1,3). Now, in this new presence of the Catholic Church at the Biennale, three other artists have been given as a seed for their free creativity another *incipit*, parallel to that of *Genesis*.

It articulates the ideal beginning of the New Testament in that unique masterpiece which is the prologue of the Gospel of John. “In the beginning was the *Lógos*, the Word... The *Lógos* was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made...” (1:1-3). There is then, a *bereshît*, an “in the beginning” (in Hebrew) in the First Testament, and an *en archê*, an “in the beginning” (in Greek) in the New Testament: in both cases the beginning is transcendent, cosmic and historical, where God breaks the silence of nothingness and gives origin to being. This is what Michelangelo represented marvellously on the vault of the Sistine, as have a legion of artists over the ages before and after him, not only with the paint brush, but also with other arts. Think only of Haydn’s musical masterpiece, *Die Schöpfung*, “The Creation” with its prodigious generation of a celestial and solar C Major emerging from the chaos of a confused and murky sonorous modulation.

So, after the opening pages of *Genesis*, what is proposed now for the reading, listening and emotion of the artists are the same sacred lines which open the extraordinary Gospel of John, the “flower of all Scripture, whose deep and hidden meaning no one can

ever fully gather”, as Origen of Alexandria of Egypt, one of the first Christian writers, affirmed in the third century. It is not easy to translate literally that opening term *Lógos*. Goethe’s Faust knew this when he sought to render the various semantic meanings in German: certainly, it is *Wort*, “word”, but it is also *Kraft*, effective and creative “power”; it is also *Sinn* for that Word gives “meaning” to the cosmic realities and historical vicissitudes, and it is, finally, *Tat*, “act”, a full and perfect event. In fact in the filigrane of the Greek *Lógos* there is an allusive reference to the Hebrew *dabar*, a word that simultaneously signifies in the language of the bible both “word” and “act”.

“The *Lógos*/Word became flesh...”

As that hymn opening the fourth Gospel develops there is another verse that sounds thus: “The *Lógos*/Word became flesh” (1:14). The axiom is paradoxical for Greek culture which sees incompatibility between transcendence and immanence, between spirit and body, indeed between the infinite, eternal, pure and perfect *Lógos* and the fragile, perishable, limited, mortal flesh *sárx*. Yet this “scandalous” encounter is at the basis of Christian theology, whose heart is in what is defined as the “incarnation”, *sárkosis* in the early Greek of the first Christian authors. The perturbing power of such a vision, which closely unites the divinity and humanity in Jesus Christ, binds the absolute and the contingent, the eternal and temporal, infinite and space, would appear as the ground of the first Christian “heresies”: so-called “gnosis” would reject such a contamination, exalting the exclusive spirituality of the divine *Lógos* against any mixing with the “carnal” human existence.

Yet it is precisely out of this meeting that Christian art is born: against all iconoclasm, which considered representations of God to be idolatrous, the “icon” is celebrated, the Christological image in which the human face becomes theophanic, that is epiphany of the divine mystery. This “theandric”, or divine-human union is suggestively rendered by the agnostic author Jorge Luis Borges who, in one of his poems entitled *John 1:14*, put into the mouth of Christ this surprising autobiography of the incarnate Word/*Lógos*:

I who am the Is the Was and the Will be
Consenting again to the language
Which is symbol and successive time ...
Lived bewitched, imprisoned in a body
And a humble soul ...
Learning the waking, the sleeping, the dreams,
Ignorance, the flesh,
The late labyrinths of the mind,
The friendship of men
And the mysterious dedication of the dogs.
Was loved, understood, exalted and suspended from a cross.

To use an expression of the French writer Charles Péguy, in Christianity “even the supernatural is fleshly” since the Son of God became the man Jesus who is also “fruit of carnal womb” (in his work *Ève* of 1913). But there is a basic corollary to the incarnation of the Word. The *Lógos*, in fact, is of its own nature eternal and infinite and, so, grafted into the temporal and the finite it irradiates it radically, structurally and permanently. This is why every human “flesh” carries in itself a divine ray, every human face is a reflection of the divine countenance. In this way we understand why Christ himself declares his presence even behind the most wretched profile of the hungry, the thirsty, the foreigner, the naked, the sick, the prisoner, so as to affirm: “What you did for one of the least of my brothers, you did to me” (see *Matthew* 25:31-46).

So the decision was taken to propose to the artists for the Pavilion of the Holy See at the Biennale 2015 another page of extraordinary human intensity and spiritual fragrancy, one of the at least 35 parables of Jesus offered by the Gospels. One that is perhaps the best narrative interpretation of the assertion “the *Lógos*/Word became flesh”. The full “incarnation” is to be sought in the famous parable of the “Good Samaritan”, handed on by the third evangelist, Luke, an author who is particularly careful about the theme of Jesus’ mercy and tenderness for each and every person who is suffering, sick in the flesh, so much so as to be defined by Dante in his work *Monarchia* as the *scriba mansuetudinis Christi*. We will now present this further text that has been put into the hands of the artists to provoke them liberally and creatively. From the celestial and luminous zenith of the divine *Lógos* we fall to the dust and darkness of the nadir of violence, pain and suffering humanity.

An injured and abandoned body on the road

The parable of the Good Samaritan (*Luke* 10:25-37) is set on the Roman road – still recognisable today – that leads over some thirty kilometres from the 800 metre height of Jerusalem to the splendid oasis of Jericho, 300 metres below sea-level, in the middle of an almost moonlike, desert horizon. So the tale has a real, historical setting, connected to a meeting between Jesus and a representative of the official Judaism of the times. For before him there is a *nomikós*, that is a “doctor of the law”, the biblical law, a lawyer, who asks Christ the question: “Master, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (10:25).

For the practising Jew, the tasks to reach that end had been codified by the rabbinic tradition in 613 precepts extracted from the Bible, 365 negative (as many as there are days in a year) and 248 positive ones, as many as there are bones in the human body according to ancient physiology. Jesus replies citing two biblical passages, both tied to “love”: “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your strength” (Deuteronomy 6:5) and “You must love your neighbour as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). The dialogue has, though, a twist with the scribe’s further reply: “Who is my neighbour?” An “objective” question that Judaism resolved on the basis of a series of concentric circles of quite limited interpersonal relations: one’s own family, the clan, the tribe, the people of Israel, the Jewish Diaspora. Jesus replied using a parable which ends with a question given back to the scribe: “Who has behaved as a neighbour?”. The turnaround is clear: instead of focusing “objectively” on the definition of the neighbour, Jesus invites us to behave “subjectively” as a neighbour towards those in need, and so immediately recognise who is truly our own neighbour.

A wayfarer is travelling that road which goes down from the mountains to the desert of Judah. Suddenly, he is assaulted by brigands who “stripped him of everything, they beat him and fled leaving him half dead” (10:30). As late as 1931 the Anglican bishop of Jerusalem was killed by a group of bandits while he was travelling this road from Jerusalem to Jericho and there were those who hypothesised that Jesus took the idea for his parable from a contemporary event. The scene is, anyhow, impressive: a body, bloody, the silence of the desert, the waiting for the passer-by. Then finally, from afar, a priest coming from the temple of Jerusalem...But immediately the let-down: “He passed by on the other side” of the road. But look here comes another passer-by, a Levite, that is someone who works for the Judaic worship. Another let-down: he too “passes by on the other side” (10:31-32).

And finally, a third wayfarer, a “heretical” Samaritan, who belongs to a community that in the Bible is called the “stupid people living at Shechem”, indeed “not even a nation at all” (*Ecclesiasticus* 50:25-26). Yet he is the only one who stops and bends down for the injured Jew, his religious and political enemy, to help him. Jesus does not waste time on details for the first two, seeking explanations for their acts of omission, motivated perhaps by ritual reasons (blood and death made those who came into contact with them impure and this was an important issue for the priest and the Levite due to their function and status). It is curious to note that in the *Talmud*, the collection of ancient Judaic traditions, we find the opposite case of a Jew who finds a Samaritan or pagan injured on the road: naturally he is not obliged to help (*Abodah Zarah*, 26).

Being a neighbour to those who suffer

Jesus brushes away that legalism which knows neither mercy nor humanity as it seeks to look after itself, and proposes instead the model-figure of the Samaritan. He is authentically “near” to the one suffering, without questioning who the neighbour is to be helped. “He went to him” (10:34), his entrails moved, as the Greek of verse 33 puts it literally, his love is active: he binds the wounds, pouring wine and oil on them using the techniques of ancient first aid, he loads the victim onto his mount, bringing him down only when they reached one of those caravanserais which were used also as hotels, and the verb “took care” is repeated twice (10:34-35), he contributes to further expenses with two denarii. His is a personal love, emphasised in the original by the repetition of the Greek pronoun *autós* (his, him): “He went to *him*, bandaged *his* wounds, put *him* on his own donkey, took *him* to an inn and took care of *him*....Take care of *him*!”

The priest and the Levite incarnate the rigid sacredness that separates their neighbour; the Samaritan represents the holiness that engages with the suffering one to save him. This is why an ancient tradition saw in the portrait of the Samaritan an image of Christ himself. On the walls of a crumbling crusader building, now situated along the same road and popularly known as the “Good Samaritan’s *khan* (caravanserai)”, an anonymous medieval pilgrim left us this graffito in Latin: “If even priests or Levites pass over your anguish, know that Christ is the Good Samaritan who will always have compassion for you and in the hour of your death, he will take you to the eternal inn”.

Greater attention is given to the impact that this would have had on Jesus’ audience in the transcription made of the parable by a modern exegete, Vittorio Fusco: “Think of yourself as a white racist, perhaps a member of the Ku Klux Klan, you who make a fuss if a negro enters a bar, and never missing an opportunity to show your disdain and aversion, imagine if you were to find yourself involved in an accident on an unfrequented road, to be there bleeding to death, waiting, while some occasional cars driven by white men pass by without stopping. Imagine if at some point a coloured doctor stopped to help you...”.

Clearly the full splendour of the Christian message of love shines through the parable, as it does many of the words of Jesus, beginning with the appeal in the Sermon on the Mount: “You have learnt how it was said: You must love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say this to you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (*Matthew* 5:43-44). And again in the testament of the last evening of Jesus: “I give you a new commandment: love one another; just as I have loved you, you also must love one another. Everyone will know that you are my disciples by this love you have for one another” (*John* 13:34-35). Also in an apocryphal *Gospel of Thomas* Jesus repeats: “Love your brother as your own soul. Protect him as the pupil of your eyes.” As opposed to coldly, objectively weighing up whether or not a neighbour is worthy of your help, Christ proposes “being near”, a fraternal action for all who are suffering and who have within them the mark of the divine, for all are children of the same God and brothers of the one *Lógos* who became “flesh”.

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