

“ABRAHAM AND THE BIRTH OF THE ‘I’”
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It is an honor to speak at this New York Encounter and to be able to engage such respected persons as Joseph Seiler and Sayyid Muhammad Baquir al-Kashmiri. It is only through a culture of encounter and dialogue, rooted in mutual respect and understanding, rooted in the truth, that we can begin to discover what is possible in the face of a seemingly impossible unity.

Unity is certainly a daunting task, given the fragmented world in which we live. The Aparecida document said it, and Pope Francis never ceases to repeat it: *We live not so much in an epoch of change but in a change of epoch.* We are living through a period of tremendous change, marked by rapid advances in communication and technology; a great movement and interaction of peoples; and an ever-more pluralistic society. Despite great advances in communication, a new Babel is emerging in which we can scarcely engage each other and in which man and woman are being reduced to a series of reactions to external stimuli, driven by the media, the market or by political ideologies.

The unity among peoples and nations is seemingly disintegrating. The political situation in this country indicates a growing polarization among peoples, often rooted in ideologies, which makes dialogue more difficult and challenging. Even faith, which once united people is becoming more difficult to transmit to subsequent generations. More than ten years ago, the Latin American bishops noted:

Our cultural traditions are no longer handed on from one generation to the next with the same ease as in the past. This even affects that deepest core of each culture, constituted by religious experience, which is now likewise difficult to hand on through education and the beauty of cultural expressions. It even reaches into the family itself, which, as a place of dialogue and intergenerational solidarity, had been one of the most important vehicles for handing on the faith. (V Conferencia General del Episcopado Latinoamericano y del Caribe, *Documento conclusivo*, CELAM, Aparecida 2007, n. 37.)

Father Carron, in the first chapter of *Disarming Beauty*, speaks about this fragmentation. His focus is principally on Europe and the loss of its Christian roots. In the attempt to use pure reason to develop ethical systems, the Enlightenment rejected, by and large, the role of faith; thus, its reason is anti-historical, uprooted from the tradition and culture which gave rise to its fundamental values. In a pluralistic society, it tends to protect values and rights in law and seeks to liberate freedom from tradition and cultural norms. This view lives in tension with the Christian view, which is open to that which is reasonable, but also understands the human and person and the world in light of faith. Carron sees a great risk in the movement for “new rights” proposed by the former, because it reduces man to his ability to reason, to his rights defined by law, to his biological and psychological impulses, but without a profound consideration of who he is. Unfortunately, this is the view that is coming to dominate, particularly among the young. Thus, what Father Giussani called the “Chernobyl Effect” is coming to pass. He wrote:

“It is as if today’s youth were all penetrated by ... the radiation of Chernobyl. Structurally, the organism is as it was before, but dynamically it is no longer the same ... People are abstracted from the relationship with themselves, as if emptied

of affection, like batteries that last for six minutes instead of six hours.” (Luigi Giussani, *L'io rinasce in un incontro (1986-1987)*, Milano: BUR, 2010, 181.)

I think what Giussani is suggesting is that we are losing a profound sense of who we are as individuals and as a people rooted in history, as part of a *living* Tradition. I emphasize the word *living* because even before there is a tradition, which can become ideological or a purely formal practice of religion, there must be an encounter with an Event – with a person. This is a real worry of Pope Francis, as he stated even before he was elected Pope:

I would say that the gravely serious thing that all this is expressing is a lack of a personal encounter with God, of an authentic religious experience. This is what I believe creates in the end the “religion *a la carte*.” I believe that one has to recover the religious act as a movement towards an encounter with Jesus Christ. (S. Rubin-F. Ambrogetti, *El Jesuita*, Bs. As., 2010, 80-81.)

Without this encounter with the event, we will not properly understand who we are or where we are going. Thus, the importance of our topic: Abraham and the birth of the I. For the “I” has been obscured in us or at least we are becoming confused as to who we are. There is a fundamental anthropological problem, one which philosophy and politics have been unable to resolve, because they do not address the deepest longings of the human heart. Father Giussani writes:

“*Only an event* can make the ‘I’ clear and substantial in its constitutive factors. This is a paradox that no philosopher and no theory-sociological or political- can tolerate: that an event, not an analysis, not a recording of sentiments, is the catalyst that enables the factors of our ‘I’ to come to the surface with clarity and to arrange themselves before our eyes, before our consciousness, with firm, lasting, and stable clearness.”

One difficulty is that even when we discover the “I”, it is not always a protagonist in history; it does not generate. I would say that two events in history have special importance – the call of Abraham and the birth of Christ – the Word made Flesh – in generating a people. Examining the encounter of God with Abraham can help reawaken the “I” in each of us, however obscured or neglected it may seem.

The culture of Mesopotamia in which Abraham lived was polytheistic. The people used myths to explain the phenomena they observed, and these explained the origin of their gods. However, the myths could never explain the fate of the universe. In the religious world of Abraham’s time, a cyclical conception of time dominated. Nature had its cycles: for the harvest, for life and death, for child-bearing, and for religious rituals. Everything was cyclical and seemingly pre-determined.

Foreign was a notion of linear time or history. The notion of election of a chosen people was also foreign to this culture. The call of Abraham was totally anti-Mesopotamic. With Abraham’s vocation, God entered history. God speaks his first words in a personal way to Abraham and in doing so reveals his divine will: God intends to form for Himself a people who will be his own and who will be aware of its role and the meaning of human existence, not merely subject to fate.

The idea of vocation manifests itself for the first time in history with the call of Abraham. Something radical occurs: a Mystery reveals Himself to Abraham and in doing so generates a new subject, who becomes conscious of himself as an “I” in relationship with a “Thou.” Abraham

understands that he is in a relationship with a Mystery and from this relationship and awareness is born the “I”. If Abraham were to have asked “Who am I?”, he would have responded, “I am Yours.” He belonged to God, and this belonging shaped his (and our) future. He belonged to God in such a way that he could obey Him in all things and surrender all things to Him.

Abraham is the beginning of God’s gesture toward humanity which finds its fulfillment in the Word made Flesh. With the personal call, God assigned Abraham a task: to leave his country and his father’s house to go to the land God would give him. The origin of the people of Israel is rooted in history: in the call and response of Abraham to accept an unforeseen, undetermined future. His life acquired a purpose: to live in response to the Other. His work became a vocation, a life lived in awareness of and in relationship with the Other. This response of Abraham also indicates that he was a free subject, capable of responsibility, no longer living a life determined by “fate.”

With the inbreaking of God into history with the call of Abraham, the “I” became a protagonist in history. Abraham discovered that reality and the plan for his life and future were made by the Other. The call was a progressive unfolding of a plan which was not his own, but which would unfold in history through his response. His vocation would generate not only an “I” but a *people* who belonged to the Lord.

Abraham’s vocation carried with it a promise and opened the way for a dynamic of hope and fulfillment, which the Mesopotamic religions could not offer. In a sense, there would now be a linear history – the history of a people, marked by promise and fulfillment. The Word of God spoke to a man and the man received that Word; in doing so, he began the history – he generated a people. This word and plan of God (and God’s fidelity) would be verified by Abraham during his life.

The word of God, born from the call and promise, can be converted into actions, which fulfill the word that has been given. The promise of Abraham to have offspring and become a great nation would encounter many difficulties: the sterility of Sara, the offering of Isaac, etc., but Abraham believed that the word spoken to him was true. This faith animated his entire existence, and so he became the father of all believers. God had promised him a land and offspring. God would do this.

God *acted* to fulfill his word, giving Sara a son – Isaac. Seeing Abraham’s willingness to offer Isaac, God *acted* to fulfill his word: returning Isaac to Abraham. Here we see the first signs of a *divine fidelity* to his word, which is a function of God’s relationship with Abraham. This divine fidelity would remain in the history of the people of Israel.

In time, the relationship that Abraham had with God was shared with his family. The scriptures speak of “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” It is this God who heard the cries of his “chosen people” when they found themselves in slavery in Egypt; He *acted* to fulfill the promise to Abraham. In that case, the call and election of Moses was the fruit of the saving action of God for His people. His powerful actions and signs led the Hebrews to enter a covenantal relationship with Him: He would be their God and they would be His people. The point is that the actions and word of God, with all its hope and promise, are intrinsically connected.

Through this covenant, Israel entered a personal and exclusive relationship with God and consented to keeping his commandments. Of course, the history of the people is marked by the infidelity of the people and idolatry, culminating in the Babylonian exile, in which the land, the

monarchy, and temple (and all the promises) seemed to be threatened definitively. However, God could not be unfaithful to His word. This is something Abraham understood from the beginning.

To call His people to fidelity to the covenant, God spoke his word in history through the prophets. Initially, God put his words in the mouth of Moses and gave him a mission. In this, we see the first divine condescension of the word, spoken this time by humans. With the death of Moses and the entrance into the Promised Land, God continued to send prophets so that they might continue to live in a relationship with Him. Again, God took the initiative. Through the prophets, the word of God would have a continuous presence among his people, which formed an ethic or morality that consisted in hearing the voice of God and not hardening one's heart.

In time, the people began to live this relationship with God and begin to reflect upon this God as the author of creation. He could be known through His created works. As in the Book of Genesis, God spoke and the heavens and the earth were made, but this writing comes as a theological reflection of a people who belonged to God and lived in a relationship with Him, a relationship which began with Abraham. Through creation God communicated with His people. Even during exile, when the people lost hope, Isaiah (40:26-28) called them to recognize His Presence in creation and reminded them that the God who brought them out of Egypt would be faithful.

Eventually, this same people recognized that they belonged to God. This belonging was expressed in the words and terms of the covenant, whose content was the Law, the commandments of the Lord, which were revealed, not to all the nations, but to Israel because of her privileged relationship with God. Thus, the word of God was converted into a rule of life for the people – the Law.

The promises of God through the covenant were to remain for generation upon generation, not just for the generation that was led out of slavery or journeyed through the desert. Thus, the word of God came to be written down to preserve the memory of the word of God, the commandments, and the covenant as the people journeyed through history. Additionally, the words of the prophets, who journeyed with the people through history, became part of the scriptures as a reminder of the risk of idolatry and a call to fidelity. Just as God consistently made promises and fulfilled them, so through his prophets, events were foretold that would be fulfilled.

In the living relationship of God with His chosen people, the people gradually came to praise God in creation, to give Him thanks, to ask for pardon, to lament their hardship and to seek His help through petition. Gradually, these words of men, emerging as fruit of a dialogical relationship with God, would also become part of the scriptures. The word of God took the form of prayer, most notably in the psalms.

In time and in the absence of prophets, the wisdom of Israel emerged from her relationship with God, especially after the Exile. The word of God was understood as divine wisdom through which Israel could re-read her history and by which future generations could be guided. Wisdom accompanied the creative works of God and through the wisdom literature, the people understood their own identity as children of God, always aware of His Presence and their relationship to Him.

None of this would have happened without God's actions – His initiative in history – and Abraham's free response. God chose to call and to speak to Abraham personally. This was an event – an encounter – between man and the living God which generated a people in history, who lived in hope of a promise.

However, one must acknowledge that the people lived under the Law, which came to be interpreted in a very narrow and restricted way, external to a relationship with the living God. Religion became something formal and, at times, burdensome to the people, called to be God's own. How was God to overcome this?

Throughout the history of this people, a great temptation was idolatry. While God had revealed his word to the people, images were not permitted, but then the *Word became Flesh and made his dwelling among us*. This is the second event – the birth of Jesus. The invisible God was made visible. He is the first born of all creation. (Col 1:15) Through his life, death, and resurrection, He called and generated a new people, giving them the power to be his adopted sons and daughters, born not by flesh or by man's willing it, but by God.

Christ is a true descendent of Abraham, obedient to the will of the Father. He *belongs* to the Father. He is the "beloved Son". His life was lived in a relationship of love with His Father. Jesus Himself says, "Your father Abraham longed to see my day, and he saw it and rejoiced." (John 8:56). He rejoiced because he saw the fulfillment in Christ of what had begun in the call that God addressed to him – in that first event. Jesus was the fulfillment of his vocation. The leaping of John the Baptist in the womb at the Visitation is a sign of this joy and the fulfillment of the promise.

Through Christ, the Gentiles too share in the plan of salvation – the new and eternal covenant, and the Church can be understood as the new Israel, journeying in history. Jesus gives definitive form to the believers who were born from the faith of Abraham. It is in the relationship with God in Christ that man discovers or rediscovers his "I", his identity. Christ is a Presence that attracts and intrigues those who encounter Him. We need only think about John and Andrew on the day they met Him. From that moment, they *belonged* to Him; they were his disciples – the first of a new "generation". To be a Christian, and so to discover who we are, is to encounter Him and adhere to Him.

Pope Benedict placed this conviction at the beginning of his first encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*:

Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction. (Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est*, 25 December 2005, 1.)

The encounter reawakens the "I" from its obscurity and neglect. It awakens a new curiosity to use one's intelligence and freedom to discover the truth, to engage reality, to search for the plan for one's life that has its origins in the Other, and to live in a new way, with a "new mind" that one did not have before the encounter with the event. Thus, a characteristic of the "offspring of Abraham" and brother or sister of Christ is to have *faith* to recognize God in all things and to be aware of His Presence and one's relationship to this Presence. Everything is to be lived from the moment of the encounter with the Presence.

Still, being aware of one's "I" is not enough. Just as for Abraham and the people of Israel, the heart must be open – it cannot be closed to the Divine Word. Moreover, in a culture that is become ever-more individualistic, the "I" must be protected and renewed within the context of a community – with companionship that supports the risk of faith, and the Church, the Christian community, can be just that as she journeys through history, generating a people for the Lord of history, on route to the new and eternal Jerusalem.