

## *A New People in History for the Human Glory of Christ*

### I A NEW PROTAGONIST IN HISTORY

The companionship of those whom Christ has assimilated to Himself in the Church, His Body, lives and reveals itself as a new people, the People of God. First, let us see what the characteristics of a people are, and then how this particular people, the People of God, are revealed in the history of mankind.

The existence of a people requires a bond between persons created by an event that is perceived as decisive for its historical meaning, for their destiny, and for that of the world. An event gives rise to a people by pointing out a stable bond of belonging between persons who were unrelated up to that moment, just as the event of a child completes the beginning of a family. Let us take an example. Imagine two families living in houses built on piles in the middle of a river that periodically swells. The unity between these two families, then five, then ten as generations pass, is a continuous fight for survival, and ultimately for affirming life. The bond that grew between them makes them seek a greater and greater consistency of their life as it was started. The reality that is born is judged to be positive, a good, and this also implies a defence, with all the ingenuity and the operative energy needed, against whoever attacks it. A yeast among them keeps them united, supports their life – it is the dawn of a people.

The life of a people is determined by a common ideal, by a value that makes it worthwhile living, struggling, suffering and even dying for, a common ideal that makes everything worthwhile. It is a dynamic that St Augustine already sensed when he observed in *City of God* that "a people is the joining together of rational beings associated in the agreed communion of the things it loves," and he adds that to know the nature of each people one needs to look at what it loves ("ut videatur qualis quisque populus sit, illa sunt intuenda quae diligit").<sup>1</sup> Second, the life of a people is determined by the identification of the suitable instruments and the methods for attaining the acknowledged ideal, for tackling the needs and challenges that gradually arise from the historical circumstances. Third, it is determined by the mutual fidelity in which one helps the other on the journey towards the realization of the ideal. A people exists where there is the memory of a common history that is accepted as a historic task to be carried out.

So the acknowledgment of the ideal gives rise to a powerful commitment to work, which strives to create the tools needed as best it can. This expresses itself ultimately in the people's charity, which has each one carry the other's weight. In this sense, the "we" enters into the definition of the self. It is the people that defines the self's destiny, its operative capacity and affective (and therefore fertile and creative) genius. If the people's "we" enters into the definition of the "I," then the "I" reaches its greatest maturity, as acknowledgment of its personal destiny and as its overall affectivity, identifying itself with the life and ideal of the people. Therefore, without friendship, that is to say, without gratuitous mutual affirmation of a common destiny, there is no people.

The most mysterious thing is that the successful formation of a people inevitably implies the prospect that its own good will be good for the world and for everyone else. This emerges clearly when the people acquire a certain security and dignity, and their ideal matures and is affirmed. This is the origin of every civilization, just as its disappearance marks its decline; a civilization declines when it is no longer able to live up to the ideal that generated it.

In this sense, the Hebrew people can be the symbol of all peoples. The people of Israel was born of an event in history,<sup>2</sup> born of the promise made to Abraham that his descendants would be more numerous than the stars in the sky and the sand on the sea-shore.<sup>3</sup> Thus a covenant was established between Yahweh, who will be their God, and the Israelites, who will be his people.

In a mysterious continuity with this history,<sup>4</sup> a new People is born from Christ, a People that shows itself on the streets of Jerusalem and under Solomon's portico.<sup>5</sup> The idea of belonging, of being God's property, which defined the Hebrew people's self-awareness, is once again found as the content of the awareness of the first Christians. For from its birth, the group conceived of itself as the unity of those who belonged to Christ and were carrying on His mission. James, who was the first head of the Jerusalem community, says in one of his speeches, quoting the prophet Amos, "Brothers, listen to me. Simon has stated how from the beginning God wanted to choose amongst the pagans a people so as to consecrate them to his name. The words of the prophets agree on this as it is written, 'After these things, I will come back and rebuild the tent of David that was fallen; I will repair its ruins and raise it up so that all other men may search for the LORD and all the peoples over which my name has been invoked, says the LORD who does these things which are known to Him from all eternity.'"<sup>6</sup>

However, belonging to the Church brings a crucial novelty – the Christians are the People of God, but the criterion of belonging to this people is no longer based on ethnic origin or sociological unity. The new People is made up of those whom God has chosen and brought together in the acceptance of his Son, died and risen.<sup>7</sup>

As we saw in the preceding chapter, the generative and dynamic law of this People is election. The elect, those whom Christ has called, receive the mission entrusted to them as a task so as to carry out the Father's plan in the world. Being sent is inherent in being chosen through the fact of Baptism. A disciple of Christ, a baptized person, cannot be conceived of unless for the mission.

One is born and baptized for the mission; the grace of the encounter and the education of belonging are given for the mission. And if someone does not reach the age of freedom and mature awareness, then we have to echo what Péguy said about the Holy Innocents: their greatness and their holiness are resolved in the fact that they were made, without knowing it and without having done anything, part of the Mystery of Christ's mission, which is the salvation of the world.<sup>8</sup>

There is a page of the Gospel that existentially documents the new People bursting into history, with the new task of belonging to Christ and of taking part in His mission.<sup>9</sup>

*From Peter's "yes" a new people is born: "Feed my flock"*

Peter's *yes* to Christ opens a connection between a person's vocation and God's universal plan. What is this connection between the personal moment and the mysterious whole of God's plan, and what does it produce? In answer to Peter's *yes*, Jesus expresses this connection with a phrase that is easy to understand: "Feed my sheep. Feed my lambs. Feed my flock."<sup>10</sup> It is as if Jesus were to have said, "Lead my flock, I will lead my flock through you, the Rock on which my building in the world, my plan for the world, stands and will develop."<sup>11</sup> Peter's belonging to Christ thus becomes a participation in God's universal plan. "Feed my sheep": lead this new living group that becomes the protagonist of history, the instrument of the victory and of the human glory of Christ in history.

Peter's *yes* is the beginning of a new relationship of the individual person with the whole of reality. It is the beginning of a new relationship, not only between each person and Jesus but with the whole of reality. The relationship between man and woman, and between parents and children, changes shape, the rules of education change shape. The way of looking at heaven and earth, of getting up in the morning and going to bed at night is different, and so is the way you go to work, the way you deal with things that don't work out, with a doubt that disturbs you, with questions that weigh on your heart. There is a change in your attitude to death and to birth.