

KINGDOM OF GOD, CHURCH AND SOCIETY

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PREMISE:

THE CONTINUITY AND RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE THEME OF **FULLNESS** AND THE THEME OF THE **KINGDOM**

INTRODUCTION

TWO IMAGES FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT:

1. The vision in Daniel (2 :31-45) of the **rock cut out, but not by human hands**, which smashes all the kingdoms it meets along its path, becoming "**a huge mountain filling the whole earth**" 3;
2. The image of **Mount Zion** in Isaiah (2 :2-5) which, rearing up above all other mountains, **becomes the universal centre of attention for all peoples**.

TWO IMAGES FROM REVELATION:

1. The vision (14 :1) which shows us **the Lamb on Mount Zion**; and
2. The vision (21 :1-5) of "**a new heaven and a new earth**" which also shows us the **new Jerusalem**. The rock, Christ; the mountain of the Kingdom; the new Jerusalem, which is the bride of Christ, the Church ("*the tabernacle of God with men*"); the ultimate renewal of all things ("*I am making everything new!*").

THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS THE GREAT THEME OF THE BIBLE

The word "**kingdom**" means "authority and sovereignty exercised by a king" :

1. The authority and government exercised by God; we could say, "the rule of God!"
2. The sphere over/in which God reigns, where His orders are obeyed, where His will is implemented or carried out. "*The sphere where God rules*".

In the Old Testament

The Old Testament reveals to us God as Creator, Ruler and Judge over the universe, the earth and history. His Kingdom is an eternal government and dominion:

In the New Testament

- **John the Baptist** prepares the way for the coming king: "*Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near*" (Mt 3:1-2). For Jesus, "*the time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!*"
- **The message of the Kingdom is Jesus' central message in the Gospels**
- **The kerygma of the Gospels:** "*The kingdom of God is here, is at hand, is among us, has come!*"
- **The apostolic kerygma:** "*Jesus Christ is Lord!*"
- **Acts and the Epistles, testify a transition in the language :** The Messiah and King becomes Christ and Lord, *Kyrios!*
- **In the Book of Revelation:** the Kingdom has come, is definitively established in its fulness!

"The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever" (Rev 11:15)

WHERE IS THE KINGDOM OF GOD?

A. THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS IN CHRIST

It is Jesus who inaugurates the Kingdom. The *physical place* of God's entry, of the Kingdom of

God on earth; the strategic and decisive *point of contact* between man and God is Jesus of Nazareth. As it is written: "*A body you prepared for me... to do your will, O God*" (Heb 10:5,7). Jesus, in his incarnate body, has become the channel, the point of contact, the passage leading from heaven to earth. In his body heaven (the "kingdom of heaven") has touched earth once and for all, permanently and eternally. Therefore "in Christ" the kingdom has come near and is available to us. The Kingdom is "in him", with him, for him. As the lovely old prayer of the Latin liturgy says, "In Christ, with Christ and through Christ, to you, God the Father Omnipotent, all honour and glory." **So**

to receive Christ means receiving the King of the Kingdom. To receive him as Lord means submitting to his rule, making room for the Kingdom.

B. THE KINGDOM OF GOD AND THE CHURCH

The kingdom of God is in Christ and Christ is the root and foundation of the church. The church

(Heb. *qaal*, Gk. *ekklesia*) is "**the definitive convocation**" of the people of God, profoundly and

irrevocably joined to Christ for eternity. No correct understanding of the church can leave out or

be separated from Christ. The head and the body, the bride and the bridegroom go together.

Christology and ecclesiology go together; ecclesiology has its root in Christology.

Nevertheless it is important to see that, while Christ is totally identified with and coincides with the Kingdom, so that he who receives Christ receives the Kingdom (the King and the rule of God), it is not the same with the church. While in Christ the fulness of the Kingdom *alread* yexists, the church, to say it with Cullmann, finds itself "between what is already and what is not yet", "between the here and now and the there and then". It is in a *process*. The *Christ event* (His person and work) has set in motion what may be called "*the Christ process*", while we wait for His return! In fact "*when Christ, who is your*

life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory" (Col 3:4).

C. THE KINGDOM OF GOD BEYOND THE CHURCH

THE PERSON AND THE COMMUNITY :

It is illuminating what the Count of Montalambert writes in his *The Monks of the West*, on the *influence* exercised by **Benedict of Norcia** on 6th-century society:

" ... I am firmly convinced that he was never concerned to regenerate anything except **his own soul and that of his fellow monks.**" : "*the person*" and "*the community*"!

THE PERSON :

There is a constant need for what Kierkegaard called 'a process of appropriation of the most passionate inwardness' Those who are unable to root the Gospel in the world of common experience are putting at risk the entire future of Christianity" (McGrath)

THE COMMUNITY :

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (in *Life Together*), reaffirms **the importance of community for the deepening of faith and of personal and collective commitment...**

VITA CONTEMPLATIVA (PRAYER) AND VITA ACTIVA (WORK) :

And alongside the *contemplative life*, the *active life* ("Ora et labora")! The new creature grows through a relationship with the Lord and expresses itself in an active process of personal **and** social (community) *transformation*. The person **and** the community, through their life and actions, *transform* the face of man and the earth (agriculture, crafts, industry, medicine...) *ferment* and *influence* the world (literature, arts, politics, governance...). These two choices in particular, *community* and *work* (both physical and intellectual), will be decisive for the future of Christianity and the world!

BENEDICT, LUTHER, CALVIN –

It is interesting to consider that for both Benedict and Luther, relationship with God (the *contemplative life*) immediately produces a commitment (*active life*) towards society and in taking responsibility for transforming the world. So *conversion* yes, but also *transformation*! Of oneself, society and the world!

The challenge of countries with millions of evangelicals, not experiencing significant transformation! The call to *conversion* of man and *transformation* of the world"

INFLUENCE AND POWER (« In but not of. » ; « As if not »):

In my opinion it is necessary to keep in creative tension, the *detachment*, of the *in but not of*

(– “in the world but not of the world”) and the “*as if not*”¹, with *the commitment* to seeking the *common good*, loving one’s neighbour. We need to maintain a very **clear distinction between** the “yeast” and the “dough”, “**influence**” and “**control**”, “**service**” and “**power**”, “**last things**” and “**penultimate things**”, what is good – even though partially and provisionally – and what comes down to us from the “future” of the coming kingdom, the new humanity, the new society, the new creation!

TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF WORK

Importance of looking at *Work as a basic means of cooperating with God* for the preservation, management and transformation of creation, in view of the new creation! Gen2:4-5 seems to suggest “ a partnership between the creating God and working human beings”². Whence **the great importance and dignity of work**. Having said which, *the crisis of work*, after the fall, is down to *personal causes* (attitudes and actions, lack of personal honesty or integrity), *structural causes* (policies of the system, organised crime, business decisions), and also – in the modern world – to *technological causes* (industrial reorganisation, obsolescence of machinery).

AND THE QUESTION ARISES: WHAT DIGNITY OR SIGNIFICANCE IS LEFT IN WORK?

Traditional theology, taking as its starting point for the Christian the influence of his new life in

Christ and the doctrine of sanctification, concluded that

a. work has value and importance as a means of *providing for one’s own needs*, but also to *help the poor and needy*;

b. work helps to *subdue the “flesh”* and *train Christian character*.

All very true! But in this perspective – so the Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf argues – the concept of work (the *active life*) becomes instrumental and subordinate to the *contemplative life*. This leads to a real risk of harming and largely diminishing the status and dignity of the *active life*.

THE CONCEPT OF WORK IN AN ESCATHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE (M. VOLF) :

And this is especially true in the light of an eschatological understanding which, rather than

envisaging the transformation of the world (*Transformatio mundi*) is thinking of its destruction

(*Annihilatio Mundi*). The first of these viewpoints implies – even if it is through a dramatic crisis of

transformation and purification – *the continuation* (as it were by a resurrection!) of this world; while

the second envisages the total destruction and *discontinuity* between the present and the future order.

Both positions have firm supporters among theologians.

Clearly, this second position can only be consistently sustained on the basis of the attribution of an intrinsic value and goodness to creation. This option gives a foundation and dignity to the work of preservation and transformation of the world, in the expectation that this earth together with the entire “*creation... will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God*”(Rm 8:21). « The liberation of creation... cannot occur through its destruction but only through its transformation » (M. Volf)

¹ “What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none; those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs is to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away” **1Cor 7:29-31**

² “*When the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, no shrub of the field had yet appeared on the earth and no plant of the field had yet sprung up; the LORD God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no man to work the ground*” **Gen 2:4-5**

PAUL :

And the argument would seem to be implicitly reinforced by Paul himself through the parallel which he establishes with "*our adoption and the redemption of our bodies*" (Rm 8:23). Our belief in the resurrection of the body would itself seem to postulate this development. "Christian faith is eschatological. Christian life is life in the Spirit of the new ceation or it is not Christian life at all. And the Spirit of God should determine the whole life, spiritual as well secular" (M. Volf)

FROM THIS WHOLE ARGUMENT IT FOLLOWS THAT:

1. *Work has its basis in the creation mandate and possesses an enormous dignity* that derives from being God's fellow workers, by the Spirit, to better preserve, manage and transform this world (as happens in man through sanctification), in anticipation of the new creation.
2. *Every Christian is called to discern his gifting and use it to help others*, not limiting charisms to those for the church but understanding that they are gifts given to us by God for the world. In this way we establish a foundation for an understanding and practice of *work in the Spirit!*

On this basis is it possible to argue in favour of some kind of commitment in politics and economics, as well as in the sphere of work ? This theological approach creates the premises for rethinking our relationship with the world and giving us a new attitude aimed at seeding the earth, "starting from here and now", with *certain elements* of the Kingdom of God. A new perspective for our pastoral practice and for a fruitful placing of the disciple and the church in the world!