

FREEDOM AND COMMON GOOD: THE CHALLENGE OF RESPONSIBILITY

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In a reflection on freedom and the common good, the biblical text on Cain and Abel (Gen 4, 1-24) can help. The two brothers are placed in the history of salvation to reflect the difficulty of living together and, above all, of fraternal relations.

In the text, Cain is the first man born. He is received by Eve as a gift from God. It is to divine grace and mercy that the first woman owes motherhood. It is the first experience of motherhood in the world, and that changes the female condition, making her, more than a husband's servant and companion, capable of being a mother to human beings. Eve is the one who lives and generates life, that's why her name will be "the one who lives" and also understood as "mother of the living".

This is a grace that grants women to be the bearers of what will later become the fundamental nucleus of the interlocution between God and humanity: the community of flesh and blood, the species, the plurality that makes human beings never able to be considered individuals isolated from one another, but rather brothers and sisters, inseparable companions in the adventure of life. This first germ of community takes place in woman's body and womb, within the first woman, Eve, the one who lives and generates life. And she begat Cain and Abel.

1And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain, and said, I have gotten a man from the LORD. 2And she again bare his brother Abel. And Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground. 3And in process of time it came to pass, that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the LORD. 4And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof. And the LORD had respect unto Abel and to his offering: 5But unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect. And Cain was very wroth, and his countenance fell 6And the LORD said unto Cain, Why art thou wroth? and why is thy countenance fallen? 7If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him. 8And Cain talked with Abel his brother: and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him. 9And the LORD said unto Cain, Where is Abel thy brother? And he said, I know not: Am I my brother's keeper? 10And he said, What hast thou done? the voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground. 11And now art thou cursed from the earth,

which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother's blood from thy hand; 12When thou tillest the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee her strength; a fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth. 13And Cain said unto the LORD, My punishment is greater than I can bear. 14Behold, thou hast driven me out this day from the face of the earth; and from thy face shall I be hid; and I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond in the earth; and it shall come to pass, that every one that findeth me shall slay me. 15And the LORD said unto him, Therefore whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. And the LORD set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him. 16And Cain went out from the presence of the LORD, and dwelt in the land of Nod, on the east of Eden.

The biblical text then presents the two brothers, Cain and Abel, with different occupations. Cain is linked to agricultural practice and Abel to pastoralism. This difference in activities will characterize a difference in attitudes, as in the development of their individual vocation, human beings develop their own perspectives based on their experience with the environment. In the case of the biblical account, Cain and Abel will also demonstrate different religious practices, which may indicate different perspectives in the religious-moral scope, as a result of their own activities. The division into two distinct functions also leads to different sacrifices, to different religious practices. Each cult belongs to a culture. There are, therefore, two altars and two services.

Verses 4b and 5 tell us that God reacts differently to the offerings of the brothers; however, it is not clear what is the reason for the divine rejection of the offering of Cain. Many questions are proposed to our reflection from these verses. For the biblist Milton Schwantes we are facing a conflict between grazing and agriculture, often cited in Gen 12-50, to which the narration would present some references. Agricultural activity would be a sedentary practice, more related to the functioning of the city-state, which gathers, around itself, semi-nomadic shepherds, musicians and blacksmiths (as shown in v.17-24). The city-state had an organization and defense structure that ended up excluding seminomadic groups or making them dependent on its organization. Peasants incorporated into the functioning of the city-state found themselves in permanent conflict against anyone who might threaten the balance of their system, that is, with independent shepherds characterized by nomadism. To defend themselves, they developed weapons and strategies against other tribes. Here we would have found, in the development of the sedentary structure and its defense, the organization of practices of violence that would guarantee its supremacy and arrogance against other nomadic and semi-nomadic groups.

Thus, according to this hypothesis, the divine reaction could be a challenge to the sedentary-agricultural practice, demanding them to leave their arrogance and oppressive supremacy, and assume the attitude of Abel, nomadic shepherd, who, in his fragility and unstable activity, offers the true worship that pleases God and is guaranteed divine protection.

Reading the narrative from the radical prophecy of the eighth century, we find the prophet Amos denouncing religion used to mask inequalities and appease the conscience of the rich (Am 5:21-23). There we find the Lord refusing the worship of Israel and, instead of opulent offerings, demanding justice. God, in the voice of the prophets, refuses not the offerings themselves, but the spirit in which they are placed before God. God is not manipulated by the quality or quantity of the offerings, but demands true worship, the practice of love, justice and faithfulness. Those would be the terms of the sin of Cain, and not in the quality of his offering. As the eponymous of the Cainites, Cain would be the one who gives rise to the cult that, later, would be harshly condemned by the prophets of Israel, for his distance from the practice of justice and fidelity to the Lord.

Another hypothesis for reflection can be found in the exegesis of Paul Beauchamp and Denis Vasse, who propose an analytical work based on the relationship between the two brothers and God, and the brothers among themselves. The theme of enemy brothers invites us to look at the expressions of this relationship. Cain, feeling inferior in relation to his younger brother, closes himself off and lets himself be invaded by hatred against his brother.

In Cain, mimetic desire appears in its most perverse form: converted into envy, into resentment and, finally, into hatred. The mimetic desire leads Cain to escape the otherness that seems to divide him, to tear him apart. In this way, he seeks to cancel out the differences, eliminating them. Mimetic desire reduces the other to himself/herself, wants to mold the other in his/her own image, refuses the difference, denies otherness and the fruitful dialogue that comes from an attitude of openness to difference as a gift and as a condition of being a person, dialogically configured.

Like Adam and Eve, Cain does not accept divine sovereignty, refuses to obey it, and makes himself a god. Otherness is denied in Cain, both in the person of Abel and in obedience to the divine mandate. Cain becomes an idolater, escapes from his foundation that resides in the Other, in the opening to otherness. "Idolatry causes a split in man

himself, which makes him implode”, losing his correct relation to Creation. Cain becomes inhuman, his identity turns to violence and despotism.

It is fundamental in the text that we observe the presence of the sovereignty of God. The reasons for the different treatment towards the two brothers is not clear: the God of Israel is sovereign, his motives elude his subjects. The God of Israel reveals himself as the great Other, "an Other over which the human being has no power, is unattainable, does not surrender to the impatient pursuits of man". However, God does not fear the otherness and difference present in his relationship with human beings. On the contrary, he accepts to participate in the dialogic experience, in a “process that helps man to go deeper into his problems and to solve them through an increasingly accurate and complex experience”.

The question for the other: limit of freedom?

Following our biblical text, we find a dialogue between God and Cain. God exhorts Cain to master sin - which is lurking - to change his attitude, his “downcast countenance”. Here the intimate drama unfolds between Cain, God and conscience, the drama of every human being. Sin is at the door and always willing to dominate more and more, until the sinner, vigilant, can dominate it last.

Divine guidance urges Cain to recognize, in his attitude, a favorable exposure to the spread of sin, and taking that awareness, to modify it in time, through trust in God and brotherhood. In his research, Von Rad finds that, in the narrative, sin does not present itself as an inner emotion to human beings, but as an objective power, which, from outside humanity and above it, waits anxiously to take possession of him. Cain was not predestined to evil, his sin “has a character of rebellion against God's desire, and it takes place in the 'absence of being' from himself, for every being is good.”

As in the narrative of the Fall, it is not God who tempts, but human being himself/herself who allows himself/herself to be attracted and seduced by greed. This gives birth to sin and generates death. In Cain's decision to listen to sin - lying in wait - we recognize the dilemma of every human being, of the whole society: to let sin advance or to dominate it? Humanity, according to Von Rad, has the obligation to dominate it, that is, to be the master. Becoming aware that sin is at the door is not a small part of human participation, but it is the imperative that imposes on him full responsibility for the dynamic. arising from his or her choice. God proposes to Cain to “do right,” but Cain

does not let himself be urged. The divine purpose is the protection of the sinner's life. Abel's murder will be an extension of Cain's sin.

In the dialogue that takes place in verses 9 and 10, Cain responds casually and provocatively about his brother. His answer is already revealing his departure from brotherly love- "*Am I my brother's keeper?*" The indifference present in his response gives us an indication that Cain is not sorry for his criminal act.

In the account of the Fall God's question to Adam is - "*Where art thou?*" In this text the question changes focus: "*Where is your brother?*". Before God the responsibility required at this time is in relation to the brother. The issue appears with a novelty, because it is a social, relational issue. The experience of God passes through the experience with the brother. Cain wants to get rid of the difficult issue that generously offers him the opportunity to confess his action. But Cain lies before the face of God. Cain's word is a word that denies the truth, that denies life. Cain's mockery tries to put his criminal act in proportion to his indifference: it means nothing. This denial of the true word not only seeks to mask the truth but becomes itself an expression of violence. Cain's act blinds him to the point where he doesn't realize that, with his brother's murder, life also dissolves in him.

Cain plowed the ground, offered his fruits, but also brought his brother's blood to the ground. That blood cries out against him from the very ground, which denies Cain its fruits. He is banned from the ground. The divine curse casts him away from the earth - hä 'adāmā. Away from human condition. Cain will become a wanderer, wandering the uncultivated and deserted land. The desert will be the absence of divine protection, material and spiritual.

Created free, Cain is the prototype of the human being who can make of life what he chooses. However, the density of the existence of the other, of the brother, makes him realize that freedom has a limit and a condition: responsibility. It is something constitutive that makes the subject human, which means, above all, to be in relation. In fact, everything that the humanity of men and women means is subordinated to this primary relationality in which the self is only based on the alter, the other, the otherness who challenges and demands to live.

Responsibility and its precedence in relation to freedom

According to Emmanuel Levinas' philosophy, responsibility comes before freedom. Its precedence shows and is proven by Levinas in his definition of who is human. The existence as a self-conscious subject depends on the relationship established with the other. Relationship is ethical. Ethics is the first philosophy. In other words, before being, the self must be in relationship. The relationship established from these assumptions is beyond being itself. The relationship with the other not only exists, but it is indispensable for the existence of a self.

The anteriority of the other is radicalized by Levinas in his book *Otherwise than being (Autrement qu'être)*. In order to present in greater depth this anteriority of the other in relation to the self, Levinas states that subjectivity can be translated as the Other-in-the-Self. Subjectivity is the Other-in-Itself, according to a mode that also differs from that of the presence of the interlocutors, the one to the other, in a dialogue where they are at peace and in agreement with each other. The Other in the Same of subjectivity is the restlessness of the Same, restlessness for the Other.

This restlessness makes the other center of the self's subjectivity. The self is, then, in the first place, "being for the other", as this opening to him/her (other), this recognition of him/her and the response (responsible) to his/her call for each subject to recognize himself/herself as a subject of conscience, is necessary. This "being for..." originates a subjectivity as a response to the call of the other. Appeal that comes from going out of the self to meet the other. A subjectivity conceived in this way prevents the self from not noticing the other, as he/she (the other) is part of the permanent construction of his/her subjectivity. The self can ignore him/her, totalize him/her, try to dominate him/her, but he can never say that he/she has not noticed him/her.

Levinasian otherness appears, therefore, with a meaning different from that of tradition. In the Western tradition, within the countless definitions received over time, in general, otherness has always been defined as a relationship between equals, mainly configured by reciprocity. This relationship is configured with a starting point in the self as one who puts himself in the other's place where he (other) needs to be known, interpreted and defined based on what the self sees in him.

In Levinas thinking, the other can never be fully known and the relationship cannot be symmetrical or marked by reciprocity. Otherness constitutes subjectivity insofar as it allows, within an asymmetrical relationship based on and with the other. In

this relationship, I can expect nothing from him because he owes me nothing. And then happens the emergence of a subject with a unique identity. He is constituent of subjectivity, since it does not only represent the relationship between identities formed in isolation, but it also means opening from and to the other. It is the encounter that the self has with the other, starting from the exit from himself. This meeting does not nullify the different identities but allows the self to build his identity and return to himself as a subject of conscience.

This would be enough to justify the need for the self to be responsible for the other, after all, for it is only through the relationship with another one that it becomes possible to talk about the self. In other words, even if the realization of responsibility for the other requires a choice of the self, such a choice is only possible because it is made by a self previously endowed with responsibility for the other. Otherwise, there would not be a conscience capable of making choices.

Responsibility, as defined by Levinas, is linked to the fact that the other is prior to the self and indispensable for his constitution. However, despite being linked to such facts, it falls short of any choice the subject can make because, when appearing as me, he is already responsible. The self does not choose to be responsible. He is “called to” and “elected to” responsibility. Being elected means being entrusted with an untransferable responsibility, making the self the only one who can respond to the appeal heard by him. The responsibility of the self, therefore, is already present in him when he is born. It's not his choice. It doesn't start with him as a subject of his own identity.

The self, in this sense, only appears as “being for”. A condition of purely being is impossible for him. “To be for” necessarily reveals a responsible subject, since the “to” indicates the need to hear what Levinas defines, among other terms, as a call that comes from the other. And therein also resides the deepest core of his freedom.

What Cain's understanding lacks is that he is free because he is responsible for his brother. His identity and his freedom lies in being his brother's guardian. To deny this is to deny being human. Therefore, the common good - the good which is common to me and you, to the self and the other - passes before the individual good. Everyone's right is prior to individual rights. Life belongs to everyone before being mine, because I'm responsible for the other's life and that's the only way I can defend and protect and care

for my life. The current situation that humanity lives with the new coronavirus pandemic clearly exemplifies these statements.

The common good as source and fruit of responsible freedom

The Creator created Adam isch ischa: male and female. Creation takes place in the plural and therefore in the plural human life it must be lived. It is useless to try to isolate oneself because it is impossible to escape the fact that I only exist and am myself from the other, from others, from everyone. The virus that has brought humanity to its knees is the result of a denial of attitude towards that. The lifestyle adopted by some has impacted the lives of many, that is, of everyone. And now, we are everyone in the same boat and in the same situation: trying to defend our health and our lives from the threat posed by the virus. There is no way to save ourselves because I am – we are - connected to everyone else who also needs to save and be saved in order for me to save myself. My life depends on yours and yours on mine.

So is the possibility of immunization brought about by vaccines. Immunization is either collective or it just doesn't happen. It's not because I took the vaccine considered better in its two doses that I'm protected if the others aren't also immunized and don't get access to it. The act of immunizing oneself therefore has a transcendental dimension. It is an inspiring and revealing event, much more than just being sanitary. Revealing the truth of what the human condition is.

We are relational beings. We do not exist except coexisting and living together. This is true since the Creator pronounced on the sixth day about the creature he had formed from clay and into whose nostrils the breath of life was blown: "It is not good that man should be alone." Adam's vocation is communion and not solitude. And so, Adam was given the companion Eve, mother of the living, and the communion took place. Otherness instituted it and that was very good, said God, before resting on the seventh day contemplating his work.

It is a fact that after that Adam and Eve broke that communion made of responsibility. And that is why it is so difficult to reconstruct it. We are all Adam and Eve who seek life with difficulties and pain, but we also enjoy it with joy and delight. And we all experience the desire for full communion at all times when it breaks up and is hampered by the various diabolic attacks of everything that divides and separates.

The virus has been a tough and fruitful pedagogy about all of this. Gestures of proximity, affection, love were forbidden to us in the name of collective health. Hugs and kisses, meetings and festive celebrations were banned. Masks that erect barriers of bodily contact have been imposed on us. And alcohol and water and soap forced us to exterminate the traces of human contact at every moment and at every step.

It took a while to realize that all this separation from others, with whom we always wanted so much to be with, was actually the right way to proceed for their benefit and for themselves. The love that was previously expressed with gestures of contact and proximity now had to be expressed through acts of detachment in the name of care and love. The vaccine is a new element that enters this scenario. Announcing hope of immunization, low contagion and control of the pandemic, it is the only option on the horizon to overcome this difficult test that we have been going through for more than a year. Therefore, the joy so radiant and a glow of such radiance in the eyes of those who, after a long pilgrimage in the midst of the darkness of fear and discouragement, now felt they could have hope again with the vaccine.

This hope consists in being able to carry out gestures of affection and communion once again. Grandparents dream of kissing and hugging their grandchildren again. Friends want to be able to get together again, talk, laugh and sing together, feel the warm and stimulating presence of those who love each other. Everyone wants to walk freely through the streets, enter cinemas and theaters, listen, sing and dance in musical shows, without fear and without barriers. The vaccine against Covid-19 made us aware of this conviction that by offering our arms to the much-desired jab we are, in fact, performing a profound ethical act.

Pope Francis, who not only vaccinated himself but provided vaccine doses for all Vatican officials, declared: "I believe that, ethically, everyone should get the vaccine. It's an ethical option because you bet on your health, on your life, but also on the lives of others"

Hopefully the pandemic has taught us in depth that nothing I think or do affects just me. I am connected to all living beings, and everything impacts everything. And within this everything, my brothers and sisters in humanity now ask me for this ethical gesture, of faith and hope in life, of openness and love. The vaccine gives me this

opportunity. May she be the paschal sign of victory for life in these times of so much passion and so much darkness that we have been living.

We are feeling restricted in our freedom: to come and go, to hug each other, to have bodily contact with each other. This distancing is an act of responsible freedom. As well as the act of getting vaccinated and thus contributing to collective health. There is not me without another, there is not me without us. For Christians, faith tells we are the image of God, who created us free. But it is the same Creator who asks us always and unceasingly: “Where is your brother?” so that we can experience and discern where we are ourselves. The common good - me and my brother, me and everyone - institutes me as free, in the responsibility that brotherhood and sisterhood can grow ever more, not leaving out of its embrace anyone or anything that exists and was created by God.

Levinasian concept of freedom, contrary to the notions that preceded it and that provoked the philosopher to structure it, has its foundations in heteronomy. Being posterior to the responsibility for the other, freedom starts to be understood as a response to the call of the other. As he – the other - is the answer, the other is taken into account before the exercise of freedom, his subjectivity is preserved and the relationship of otherness is protected from a self that understands himself as an autonomous free being, owner of thinking and doing based on an infinite freedom and indisputable priority in the face of the needs of others.

This conception of freedom, however paradoxical and contradictory it may seem, is justifiable insofar as we realize that the need to be responsible, if we can name what is caused by the face-to-face relationship, is not an external de-termination. It exists even before the conscious self exists – and is even one of the reasons for its existence as a conscious being. Thus, being responsible exists even before the subject can make any decision. Evidently, the call that comes from the other is external, but the subject may or may not respond to it. Of course, by not responding, he is going against what is part of his own constitution. However, having to respond to the call that comes from the other is not imposition or even servitude. The answer to the demands that come from the other is already the realization of something that is in the self by nature: the unconditional responsibility for the other. Therefore, above all, it is the possibility of realizing one's freedom and to build altogether, the common good.

And this common good must include preferentially those who are in more need and are more vulnerable. As Pope Francis recalls in *Fratelli Tutti* n. 235: *Those who work for tranquil social coexistence should never forget that inequality and lack of integral human development make peace impossible. Indeed, “without equal opportunities, different forms of aggression and conflict will find a fertile terrain for growth and eventually explode. When a society – whether local, national or global – is willing to leave a part of itself on the fringes, no political programmes or resources spent on law enforcement or surveillance systems can indefinitely guarantee tranquility”. If we have to begin anew, it must always be from the least of our brothers and sisters.*