

Becoming a human being involves more than conception and birth. It is a mandate and a mission, a command and a decision. We each have an open-ended relationship to ourselves. We do not possess our being unchallenged; we cannot take our being for granted as God does. Nor do we possess it in the same way as other creatures around us. Other animals, for example, survive in mute innocence and cramped necessity. With no future horizons, they are what they are from the start; the law of their life and being is spelled out for them, and they resign themselves to these limits without question.

We, however, are challenged and questioned from the depths of our boundless spirit. Being is entrusted to us as a summons, which we are each to accept and consciously acknowledge. We are never simply a being that is “there” and “ready-made,” just for the asking. From the very start we are something that can Be, a being who must win selfhood and decide what it is to be. We must fully *become* what we *are* - a human being. To become human through the exercise of our freedom - that is the law of our Being.

Now this freedom, which leaves us to ourselves, is not pure arbitrariness or unchecked whim; it is not devoid of law and necessity. It reveals itself at work when we accept and approve with all our heart the being that is committed to us, when we make it so much our own that it seems to be our idea from the first. The inescapable “truth” of our Being is such that it makes freedom possible rather than threatening it (cf. Jn 8:32). Thus the free process of becoming a human being unfolds as a process of service. In biblical terms it is “obedience” (cf. Phil. 2:8) and faithfulness to the humanity entrusted to us.

However, this process of freely becoming human has its own inherent temptation. By its very nature this process is a trial; imbedded in it is the danger of going awry. Entrusted with the task of making ourselves human, we face danger at every side. We are always a potential rebel. We can scarcely betray the humanity entrusted to us, and we have done precisely this from the very beginning (the first human beings refused to embrace the Being entrusted to them). We can try to run away from ourselves, from the burdens and difficulties of our lot, even going so far as to take our own life. Under the myriad evasions of a materialistic Docetism, we can “stifle” the truth of our Being (cf. Rom. 1:18). In short, we can fail to obey this truth, thus aborting the work of becoming a human being.

On the other hand, we may withstand this temptation and lovingly accept the truth of our Being. For the moment we shall call this attitude “love of self.” Here we might glimpse the deep and positive significance of an attitude whose ethical and religious scope is usually overlooked and underrated, even when we use the eyes of faith. Understood correctly, our love for ourselves, our “yes” to our self, may be regarded as the “categorical imperative” of the Christian faith: you shall lovingly accept the humanity entrusted to you! You shall be obedient to your destiny! You shall not continually try to escape it! You shall be true to yourself! You shall embrace yourself!

Our self-acceptance is the basis of the Christian creed. Assent to God starts in our sincere assent to ourselves, just as sinful flight from God starts in our sinful flight from ourselves. In accepting the chalice of our existence, we show our obedience to the will of the Creator in heaven (cf. Mt. 26: 39-42); in rejecting it, we reject God. Knowing the temptation that humanity itself is, knowing how readily we try to escape the harsh distress of the human situation, knowing how difficult it is for us to bear with ourselves and how quickly we feel betrayed by ourselves, knowing how difficult it is for us not to hate ourselves (as Bernanos points out), we can then understand why God had to prescribe “self-love” as a virtue and one of the great commandments. We can then understand why we constantly need the help of God’s grace. We can then realize how much easier it is to say “no” instead of “yes” to oneself, and why all asceticism is first designed to serve this great “yes.”

We must learn to accept ourselves in the painful experiment of living. We must embrace the spiritual adventure of becoming human, moving through the many stages that lie between birth and death. Even the life of the child is darkened by the repulsive enigma of death. Soon enough, with our first feeble explorations into the uncharted inner depths of our personalities, are we tempted to an outright denial of what is most our own. Our flight from ourselves begins early.

God “became human” and took on our flesh. We say this all too casually, because inadvertently we are accustomed to consider only the biological event, the external process. But the assumption of a human’s type of Being is primarily a spiritual venture pulsing through the free activity of our heart. It is an unfolding story, an inner journey; it commences with conception and birth, but these events do not tell the whole story.

God becomes human: What are the spiritual lineaments of this process? What does it involve? What motivations lie behind it? Paul describes it in a famous passage (Phil. 2:5-11). The Synoptics also have something to say about it, describing its inner thrust in the story of Jesus’ temptation in the desert. Unless we are greatly mistaken, this story is the biblical way of presenting the spiritual process involved in God’s assumption of humanity.