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***HOMO IMAGO DEI* IN DIETRICH BONHOEFFER'S POINT OF VIEW. AN ECUMENICAL PERSPECTIVE**

One of the major anthropological issues in theology is the theme of the image of God in the human person. Although this topic appears in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's writings, it has not been comprehensively elaborated. Particular elements emerge in *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1–3*¹ and *Discipleship*.² An analysis of these texts allows for a consistent synthesis presenting a coherent picture of this topic to be created, and this is the purpose of this article. In order to better grasp the ecumenical importance of this Protestant thinker's view, it will be examined from an anthropological Catholic perspective, as concluded in "Communion and Stewardship,"³ a recently published document of The International Theological Commission. This kind of *modus procedendi* not only shows the uniqueness of D. Bonhoeffer, but also helps us to perceive the significant progress of interpretation of the human mystery by theologians from Catholic and Protestant denominations alike.

1 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3*, DBWE 3.

2 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, DBWE 4. Polish edition: *Nasładowanie*, trans. Joanna Kubaszczyk (Poznań: W drodze, 1997).

3 International Theological Commission, *Communion and Stewardship. Human Persons Created in the Image of God* (2004) [further, CS]; <http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20040723_communion-stewardship_en.html> [accessed 13 June 2015].

1. Freedom as an Image of God

The words of Genesis, stating that human beings are the *imago Dei*, express God's creative intention in assigning to creatures characteristics similar to their Creator. There is a paradox in the human being, as a creation which carries within an image of the invisible God. What, then, is this image? How does this picture work? According to the German pastor Bonhoeffer, the image of God in human beings is freedom. However, he did not understand freedom as a quality, capability or feature which would characterize human beings.⁴ Starting from the biblical meaning of this term, he noted that freedom does not mean "something that people have for themselves, but something that they have for others."⁵ God, being truly free, did not keep his freedom to himself when creating mankind. In the act of creation, he revealed his freedom as *being-free-for*.⁶ This results in freedom being an interpersonal relation. Being free, therefore, is equivalent to being free for another human being. "A creature is free," states Bonhoeffer, "in that one creature exists in relation to another creature, in that one human being is free for another human being."⁷ We have to recognise that the Pastor does not limit his reflection merely to the biblical sense of this term. He extends the concept of freedom by referring to philosophy. In his view, the image of God in a person is not based on the analogy of entity (*analogia entis*) in human beings, which "in his existence could be said to be like God's being."⁸ Rather, the divine likeness is based on the analogy of relation (*analogia relationis*).⁹ However, it should be noted that this relation is not inherent to human potential, but is bestowed by God on humans.¹⁰ Through this relation, humans are given freedom.¹¹ The freedom of the human beings derives from their relation. In fact, this freedom proclaims the image of God, and distinguishes humans among other creatures, signifying their dignity and greatness.

An interesting part of Bonhoeffer's conception of the image of God is its personalistic dimension. While elaborating *imago Dei* in *A Theological Exposition of Genesis*, he intentionally rejects the analogy of entity (*analogia entis*) in favor of *analogia relationis*. On the other hand, in *Discipleship* he approaches the first of the above concepts. As he observed, this picture is revealed not only in the words and deeds of Jesus' public pronouncements, but also specifically in his death on the cross – his

4 DBWE 3:63.

5 DBWE 3:62.

6 DBWE 3:63.

7 DBWE 3:64.

8 DBWE 3:65.

9 DBWE 3:65.

10 DBWE 3:65.

11 DBWE 3:65.

obedience to God's will in suffering and death.¹² For Bonhoeffer, the new image of God in humans does not relate to any one aspect of a human being, but it concerns the whole human. "A human being thus develops not only a new way of thinking, willing, and doing things, but a new image, a new form."¹³

2. The Fall of Man

Bonhoeffer, commenting on the Fall, observed that the Serpent was testing man, by suggesting that through his own decisions and actions he could become similar to God.¹⁴ The tempter offered the possibility of becoming "like God," but according to his own design.

The consequence of this mistaken human decision was to be deprived of God's likeness. Human beings stopped reflecting God.¹⁵ "The image of God, as the Creator's gracious gift, has been lost on this earth."¹⁶

3. The Renewal of the Image of God

In Bonhoeffer's opinion, the renewal of the *imago Dei* in human beings depends on their full reintegration. "Body, soul, and spirit, that is, the form of being human in its totality, is to bear the image of God on earth."¹⁷ However, people's attempt to restore the *imago Dei* by their own efforts alone in fact strengthens their distancing themselves from God. Thus, based on their own efforts alone, they are not able to reach the intended aim. So how can this renewal be achieved? As Bonhoeffer noted, the process of rebuilding God's image depends on human beings yielding to this restoring process, which is accomplished by God's transforming grace. The effect of this process is presumed to be a "metamorphosis,"¹⁸ revealed by the Son of God clothing humanity in the mystery of incarnation.

Whilst pondering the mystery of the incarnation from the perspective of Genesis, Bonhoeffer emphasized that the Son of God, i.e. "God's own image, which had remained with God through eternity, now assumes the image of the fallen, sinful human being."¹⁹ By coming into the world, he entered into the midst of the reality of sin and death.²⁰ His birth was a revelation to humanity of that which it

12 DBWE 4:284.

13 DBWE 4:284.

14 DBWE 4:281.

15 DBWE 4:282.

16 DBWE 4:282.

17 DBWE 4:283.

18 DBWE 4:283.

19 DBWE 4:283.

20 DBWE 4:283.

lost in Paradise. Thanks to the mystery of the Incarnation, the Son of God, God in Christ created anew his own image on earth.²¹ This means that the incarnation was simultaneously the creation of the new man, and thus a new image of God.²²

At the same time, God's image revealed through Christ in humanity became both a gift and a burden. Everyone who would like to participate in his glory first must become like the image of the suffering and obedient Servant on the cross. "Whoever seeks to bear the transfigured image of Jesus must first have borne the image of the crucified one, defiled in the world."²³ Thus, the image of the crucified Jesus is in fact the true image of God. The consequence of this identification is a task to be performed by Christians living with the mystery of the Crucified One. "It is the suffering of none other than Jesus Christ that all of his disciples on earth have to endure."²⁴ As the Protestant thinker noted, "It is here [with martyrdom] that the life of the disciple is most profoundly identical with the likeness of Jesus Christ's form of death."²⁵ From what remains of the relationship with the crucified Christ springs the hope of gaining the image of Christ transformed. "All those who remain in community with the incarnate and crucified one and in whom he gained his form will also become like the *glorified and risen one*."²⁶ "Our goal is to be shaped into the entire *form* of the *incarnate*, the *crucified*, and the *risen one*."²⁷

As Bonhoeffer noted, to achieve this assimilation is not the contribution of human action, but first and foremost the fruit of the prior action of God's grace in human beings. "It is not we who change ourselves into the image of God. Rather, it is the very image of God, the form of Christ, which seeks to take shape within us,"²⁸ and "[i]t is Christ's own form which seeks to manifest itself in us."²⁹ "The incarnate, the crucified, and the transfigured Christ takes on form in individuals because they are members of his body, the church."³⁰

4. Ecumenical Implications

Apart from its versatility, the anthropological vision offered by Bonhoeffer is distinguished by ecumenical openness. However, we can observe some differences in the interpretation of the mystery of human beings. The ecumenical openness of

21 DBWE 4:284.

22 DBWE 4:284.

23 DBWE 4:284.

24 DBWE 4:285.

25 DBWE 4:286.

26 DBWE 4:286.

27 DBWE 4:285.

28 DBWE 4:284–285.

29 DBWE 4:285.

30 DBWE 4:287.

Bonhoeffer's study, already mentioned, is revealed in full when we read his doctrine about *imago Dei* in the light of a recently published document by The International Theological Commission "Communion and Stewardship."

The Relational Aspect of the Image

As we can see, Bonhoeffer's view of the image of God in human beings is based on *analogia relationis*, whereas until recently the Catholic viewpoint assumed that only the *analogia entis* was modified. Yet as the Theological Commission's document notes: "man is not an isolated individual but a person—an essentially relational being. Far from entailing a pure actualism which would deny its permanent ontological status, the fundamentally relational character of the *imago Dei* itself constitutes its ontological structure and the basis for its exercise of freedom and responsibility" (CS 10).

As already mentioned, a human being's relationality is based on the mystery of the Holy Trinity. "God is not a solitary being, but a communion of three Persons. Constituted by the one divine nature, the identity of the Father is his paternity, his relation to the Son and the Spirit; the identity of the Son is his relation to the Father and the Spirit; the identity of the Spirit is his relation to the Father and the Son" (CS 41). Hence, the Catholic view accepts that God's image in its ontic structure is essentially dialogical and relational.

Imago Dei after Original Sin

It is true that Bonhoeffer highlighted the consequences of original sin, which are expressed by the deprivation of the *imago Dei*, but the Catholic theologians' document states that both "Catholic and Protestant exegetes now agree that the *imago Dei* cannot be totally destroyed by sin, since it defines the whole structure of human nature" (CS 46). Hence, freedom cannot be terminated, even if the situation in which freedom is exercised is in part determined by the consequences of sinfulness" (CS 46). This kind of statement opens another level in ecumenical dialogue.

The Renewal of God's Image

It is worth noting that even contemporary Catholic opinion emphasizes the fundamental role of Christ's saving work in renewing God's likeness in mankind. "The Son is the perfect Man who restores the divine likeness to the sons and daughters of Adam which was wounded by the sin of the first parents (*Gaudium et spes*, 22)" (CS 23). Thanks to participation in the paschal mystery, Christ makes people similar to himself (CS 47).

God's Image as a Freedom

When Bonhoeffer was considering the issue of *imago Dei*, he said that this image expresses itself in mankind's freedom, directed towards God. This intuition is also strongly emphasized in the Catholic document, which states that

the reality of personal sin shows that the image of God is not unambiguously open to God, but can close in upon itself. Salvation entails a liberation from this self-glorification through the cross. The paschal mystery, which is originally constituted by the passion, death and resurrection of Christ, makes it possible for each person to participate in the death to sin that leads to life in Christ (CS 49).

From this perspective, "grace is not merely a remedy for sin, but a qualitative transformation of human liberty, made possible by Christ, as a freedom freed for the Good" (CS 48). At the same time human beings receive salutary fruits through the mediation of the grace of Christ who, as a new Adam and the head of a new humankind, through his death for sinners and by the resurrection, creates a new salutary condition for man. "In this way, man becomes a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17) who is capable of a new life of freedom, a life 'freed from' and 'freed for'" (CS 50). It is worth noting that, for the authors of the document, the term "freed from" means "freed for" (CS 51). "This 'freedom for' is made possible by Jesus Christ, the perfect icon of the Father, who restores the image of God in man" (CS 51). Freedom from sin means freedom for God in Christ and the Holy Spirit (CS 51).

The Personalistic Dimension of the Image

Bearing in mind Bonhoeffer's personalistic dimension of the *imago Dei*, we have to point out that contemporary Catholic anthropology also emphasizes the integrity of human beings, thus overcoming a dualistic view (mind and body) (CS 27). The human being is considered in his complementarity in integrity, at the same time highlighting his carnal dimension (CS 28).

Renewal of *imago Dei*: Between Passive and Active Participation

We have to stress that in Catholic opinion the renewal of God's image in human beings is not just a passive process. As the document already mentioned points out: "To 'become' the image of God requires an active participation on man's part in his transformation, according to the pattern of the image of the Son (Col. 3:10)" (CS 12). And: "Human beings grow in their resemblance to Christ and collaborate with the Holy Spirit who, particularly through the sacraments, fashions them in the image of Christ. In this way, man's everyday existence is defined as an endeavor to be conformed ever more fully to the image of Christ" (CS 55). This statement

is superbly echoed in Bonhoeffer's classic work *Discipleship*, which is devoted to the following of Christ by his disciples.

Conclusion

Summing up, we have to state that, despite the differences which have been highlighted between *imago Dei* in Bonhoeffer's vision and Catholic doctrine, we can also observe many convergences and similarities, which contribute excellently to ecumenical dialogue. In the first place, because both views of *imago Dei* are characterized by Christocentrism: Christ is the true image of God. Secondly, a common element connects the renewal of God's image in human beings with the paschal mystery (the passion, death and resurrection of Christ). The renewal of *imago Dei* is the grace bestowed on mankind by Christ, the new Adam and the perfect image of the Father.

Another common element of God's likeness is the relational aspect of this image. Catholics, faithful to the ontological dimension of *imago Dei*, accept the relational dimension which results from the relation of three persons in God. It is worth noting that the theme elaborated by Bonhoeffer, stressing human freedom as a constitutive element of God's image, is considered as "freedom for," which also appears in the Catholic document, thus forming another common element in the ecumenical dialogue. The next similarity is revealed in the personalistic dimension of God's image. Both Bonhoeffer and contemporary Catholics highlight the personalistic dimension of human beings, encompassing the whole human being. Catholics, by relieving themselves from a dualistic perspective on the human person, have directed themselves towards such a view.

The major difference between the two viewpoints is the understanding of human nature after original sin. Bonhoeffer remains faithful to the protestant tradition when he talks of the resulting loss of the image of God, whereas Catholics state that the image was distorted without being completely destroyed. If we accept Bonhoeffer's concept of identifying *imago* with freedom, I draw the conclusion that human beings would not lose the gift of freedom after the fall. This freedom was, however, deformed: people's actions are frequently determined by their own ego and their aspiration to self-realization, but they are also responsible for their deeds. The Catholic theologians' document points out that some contemporary Protestant exegetes accept this kind of viewpoint. Both these opinions highlight the primacy of God's grace in the process of renewal. On the other hand, Catholics stress that the process of renewal is not just a passive reality, but that human beings take an active part in it.

Although Bonhoeffer in *Discipleship* does not mention this active participation on the part of human beings regarding the renewal of *imago Dei*, his whole work

highlights the concept that the process of mankind's likeness to the image of Christ is not possible without following the Master and his disciples.

This comparison of different viewpoints presents many common points, which open a new perspective in the ecumenical dialogue between the two traditions. It should encourage and inspire further research in discovering the truth about human beings, created in the image of God.

***Homo imago Dei* in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Point of View.**

An Ecumenical Perspective

Abstract

This article examines Bonhoeffer's understanding of *Homo imago Dei* in *Creation and Fall* and *Discipleship* from the perspective of Catholic anthropology, as expressed in the recent document published by the International Theological Commission, "Communion and Stewardship." Despite differences between *imago Dei* in Bonhoeffer's vision and Catholic doctrine, one can observe many convergences and similarities, which contribute to ecumenical dialogue. Both views of *imago Dei* are characterized by Christocentrism: Christ is the true image of God. Another element connects the renewal of God's image in human beings with the paschal mystery (the passion, death and resurrection of Christ). The renewal of *imago Dei* is the grace bestowed on mankind by Christ, the new Adam and the perfect image of the Father. Another common element of God's likeness is the relational aspect of this image. Bonhoeffer stresses human freedom as a constitutive element of God's image, which he describes as "freedom for," a concept which also appears in the Catholic document, thus forming another common element in the ecumenical dialogue. Both Bonhoeffer and contemporary Catholics highlight the personalistic dimension of human beings, which encompasses the whole human being. This comparison of different viewpoints thus presents many common points, which open a new perspective in the ecumenical dialogue between the two traditions. It should encourage and inspire further research in discovering the truth about human beings, created in the image of God.