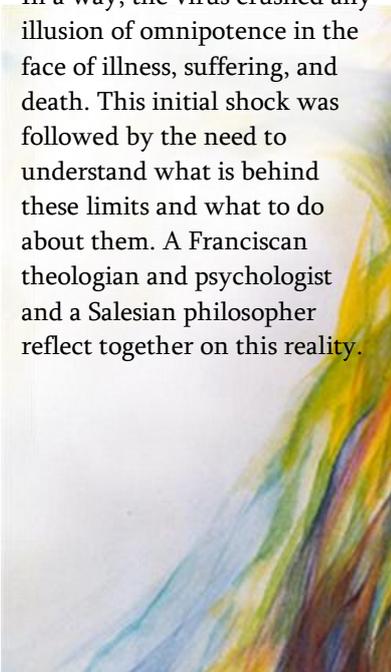


## An Anthropology of Perfection, An Anthropology of Limits

# Towards an "ethic of infinity"

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In addition to the Covid-19 pandemic, which unexpectedly brought us to the brink without time to consider the consequences, a cry arose from many quarters: This crisis has forced humanity to recognize its weaknesses and limitations. In a way, the virus crushed any illusion of omnipotence in the face of illness, suffering, and death. This initial shock was followed by the need to understand what is behind these limits and what to do about them. A Franciscan theologian and psychologist and a Salesian philosopher reflect together on this reality.

### The risk of omnipotence and perfection

We are all aware of the dizzying developments and extraordinary possibilities that science and technology are opening up for us. Technological, scientific and economic progress immerses us into a culture that is convinced that nothing is impossible, even what the laws of nature seemingly deny. It is the 'technocratic paradigm' mentioned in *Laudato si*, the anthropology of the 'cult of self' as the master of nature and the universe and the worshipper of the 'almighty self'. It is a mastery which risks drawing humanity into a delirious and collective kind of omnipotence<sup>1</sup>. The 'success' and 'efficiency' philosophy which drives us towards continual competition to be in a state of permanent tension, where the desire for power dominates and even goes beyond one's own limits.

Alongside this, especially in Western culture, the notion of perfection<sup>2</sup> that evolved in ancient philosophy as the 'absolute value at all levels of being' grew and infected other cultures as well. The New Testament's vision goes beyond this, to the perfection of charity, rooted in Love of God and in the Gift of his Spirit. But still, classical notions of self-perfection deeply influenced Christianity and risk over-emphasizing the ascetic aspect of Christian life at the expense of the dimension of grace. The phrase often heard is, 'God wants all of us to be perfect'. In his Critique of Practical Reason, Kant outlined the first principle of 'duty': 'Act in the most perfect way possible for you.' But, if, instead, this is understood in a reductive way, 'sacrosanct' principles run the risk of dehumanization when they are no longer viewed within our own existence as creatures, with all our ongoing, intrinsic weakness.

## Consequences in not accepting our limits

Together, drunken power and the desire to achieve "human perfection" at any cost, bring obvious cultural and lifestyle consequences. Failed attempts to excel and every scientific or technological error end up putting people into crisis. *Any failure can give rise to inner trauma.* Thus, the pretense that life should aim exclusively at perfection becomes the pretense that all are perfect. This leads to the idea that people should be judged according to standards of perfection, *especially their failure to achieve perfection.* Since perfection is regarded as the apex of the spiritual realm, all that is physical, sexual, the emotional and the sensory that characterize our human bodily existence, seem somehow to have a negative connotation from their very outset. They are seen as realities that need to be mortified or eliminated because they may possibly lead one to sin.

*The ideal human person is envisioned as one who goes beyond all limits. Yet, there is little understanding of the fact that perfection is not found in going beyond all limits. Instead, one finds that this path only ends with dehumanization.* Striving for perfection itself does not help people to live, love, smile, enjoy life or forgive others. Perfectionism's compass can disorient a person even to the point of making one's existence unbearable. It can go so far as to impose rules that destroy us in exchange for an unattainable image of what "I should be". Perfectionism, with its ensuing neuroses, and constantly leads us to say: 'If I make a mistake, it is because I am not smart enough. I cannot be proud of who I am and thus I cannot expect others to respect or love me.' One can even be stripped of his or her own humanity and end up searching for escapes from the normality of simple, everyday life, with all its many imperfections.

## An anthropology of limits

Pope Francis has repeatedly said that humanity will not be the same, neither better nor worse than before, in the post-pandemic era. The chance of it being better depends on our successfully recognizing, accepting and integrating the insurmountable limits of death, pain and personal and familial suffering, as well as acknowledging that we are members of the same wounded, global family. It will require the integration of an anthropology of perfection with an anthropology of limits and will need a focus on the education of younger generations. We must start by replacing a 'self-exalting' humanism with a 'self-accepting' humanism. This means moving from mental categories that see mistakes, failures, and limitations only as life's nemeses, to recognizing them as 'givens' instead, and as essential parts of human existence that serve as life's building blocks upon which to learn. Limits are essential parts of reality in all its existence, while limitlessness is only conceptual because it is physically nonexistent in the reality of creatures. Ceasing to have limits signifies a ceasing to exist.

Thus, we need to learn to see ourselves not as beings who make mistakes or fail, but as beings that start from acceptance of self, open to facing and experiencing life despite our mistakes. To put it another way: to be open to learning from those very same mistakes. What may seem like a defect can instead become a springboard to becoming ever more 'human.' The golden rule of happiness is, above all, accepting ourselves as we are. But it is not enough to accept our own limits and integrate them. We must also accept other's limits, those of every social construct and of nature itself.

## From limits to infinity in transcendence

The hidden value of human limits is becoming aware of our own ontological reality: *to be gift*. The human person is 'given'. We are not masters of our own lives but are ontologically linked to the author of the gift, to whom we must give ourselves back.

Everything changes when humanity recognizes and accepts the ontological limit contained in being gift. All limitations, including those of others, can be accepted. We can arrive at accepting the presence of an Other in our own lives. Becoming what we are means accepting the project of the One who has given the gift. Of course, whoever believes in God-Love is aware their existence is rooted in the heart of the Trinity. He or she experiences that implementing this 'project' means fully realizing themselves and attaining happiness. This is achieved not so much by *going up* toward perfection, but in having the courage to 'go down' towards limits and open ourselves to the gift. Considering this carefully in the light of Christian anthropology, our own limitations are no longer even just a 'less', but they instead call us towards infinity. Infinity has its own light and measure. *Lived in this way, limits are not a closure but an opening. They do not humiliate but rather exalt freedom and open us out to a relationship with the infinite.*

When we discover the grace contained in our limits as creatures, we find a hidden reality, an irresistible push to go beyond ourselves toward transcendence. Insofar as we cross this threshold of limits, we can come to discover a new and previously unknown dimension.

## The Way of Love: A stairway down to imperfection

The ethical starting point that integrates an anthropology of perfection with one of limits is found in the radicality with which God-Love assumed the human condition. Jesus, through his incarnation, death and resurrection - as Paul the Apostle reminds us - reached the furthest possible distance from God through suffering, death and the consequences of sin.

If humankind's dream has been one of becoming infinite and almighty like God, the 'dream' of God was one of becoming a tiny newborn out of love, one who was poor and limited like humankind. To become incarnate God chose the way of weakness. He assumed a flesh that is 'like us in all things' and marked by weakness. The fact that the Word, who is God, assumed 'flesh' is not a rejection of frailty and impermanence. Rather, it is to mark the beginning of a new history. It is the paradoxical law of love: infinity becomes finite, omnipotence becomes weak, the unattainable becomes flesh and able to be touched. God becomes an infant. St Leo the Great writes: 'He descended among us, not only to assume the substance, but also the condition of sinful nature. The reason for the birth of the Son of God was none other than that he could be nailed to the cross.'<sup>3</sup>

When the 'flesh' is assumed by the Word, that miraculous sacramental dynamic emerges: the particular becomes Universal; the contingent becomes Absolute; the relative becomes Necessary; time becomes Eternity; human becomes Divine; the creature becomes Creator.

If Jesus, out of love, assumed humankind's limits to bring us into the Trinity, we believers, out of love and in Jesus, should choose this way of lowering ourselves to take on our own limitations. Uniting the suffering of our limitations to that of Jesus, we can experience a kind

of 'divine alchemy'. It flows as a current from the positive and the negative. It is love from suffering and life from death. Through love of Jesus crucified and forsaken, believers enter the unprecedented dimension of the greatest and purest love, a love that allows us to arrive at mercy and forgiveness. In the 'cry' of suffering on the cross, Jesus reveals to humanity the paradoxical, hidden law of love: To give life, it is necessary to die; to grow we must lose, to come to the fullness of love we give our limitations to the one who can transform them into a precious pearl.

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- <sup>1</sup> On the anthropological consequences of science and technology, cf. as noted, among others, by M. Heidegger, *The Question of Technology*, in *Essays and Discourses*, Mursia, Milan 1976; Id., *L'abbandono, Il melangolo*, Genoa 1983; M.T. Pansera, *Man and the paths of technique. Heidegger, Geben, Marcuse*, Armando Editore, Rome 1998.
  - <sup>2</sup> Cf. R. Pama, *A therapy for the human person. Theoretical aspects of Imperfection Therapy*, Citadel, Assisi 1996; Id., *Liberaci dalla perfezione*, Cittadella, Assisi 1995; Id., *Honor your limit*, Citadel, Assisi 1997.
  - <sup>3</sup> Cit. in G. Marchesi, *La cristologia trinitaria by H.U.v. Balthasar*, Queriniana, Brescia 1997, p. 336.