

A Biblical Reflection on the Life of Communion and Mysticism

# Our Filial Relationship with God and Fraternal Communion

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*In exploring the biblical roots of a mysticism of encounter, the author looks to the Synoptic Gospels, Pauline doctrine, and the writings of John. Union with God and fraternal communion are not the result of a particular ascetic practice but rather have their origins in freely given gifts of God received through Jesus, most especially in the moment of his death and resurrection. The author is a professor at Sophia University Institute in Loppiano (near Florence, Italy).*

## The Synoptic Gospels: Two loves in perfect harmony

Jesus was asked: "Which commandment is the greatest of all?" (Mk 12:28).<sup>1</sup> In quoting Deuteronomy 6:4s (love of God) and Leviticus 19:18 (love of neighbor), Jesus synthesizes the two tablets of the Law (the Decalogue). Hillel and other Rabbis of his time would surely have agreed. However, Jesus does not simply juxtapose these two commandments. Rather, he affirms that they to be made one (Mk 12:31b) or, as Matthew speaks of: love of God "is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it" (Mt 22: 38-39). That is, love of neighbor has the same value: it has the same nature as the first.

Jesus has elevated love for neighbor to the level of love for God. This is where the novelty lies: these two commandments cannot be separated. Jesus not only summed up the Law by freeing it from innumerable, meticulous, religious precepts and pure-impure, sinner-just, sacred-profane categorical divisions; He linked God directly and forever to the human person and the human person to God.

The Crucified One, whom God resurrected, provides definitive confirmation of this truth: "for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me . . . just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." (Mt 25: 35ss).

Salvation, which signifies communion with God, is a Christological pathway and entails love of neighbor. Thus, two loves in perfect harmony: they do not split the heart of the believer and they do not compete with one another. One does not exclude the other, nor does it exploit the other for its own goals of holiness.

## **Paul: "To be in Christ"<sup>2</sup>**

After the Resurrection, the Gospel proclamation was centered in its focus: God has resurrected the Crucified One. From the outset, Jesus' resurrection was considered the act by which God, in the Crucified One, inaugurated the fulfillment of his plan for humanity. To be "in Christ" signified being in communion with his death-resurrection journey,<sup>3</sup> a journey mediated by faith and the gift of the "Spirit of the Son given in Baptism" (cf. *Rm* 6) and lived in love (*agape*).

Paul sums up Christian life as one lived in conformity with God's will: "For in Christ Jesus [...] the only thing that counts is faith working through love" (*Gal* 5:6). Here, the Apostle links together Jesus' double commandment. From the moment of birth into one's own fulfilling faith journey -- between the "already" and the "not yet" -- a believer becomes "a new creature," a child of God. As Romano Penna affirmed: "For Paul, mysticism is the foundation of ethics. Or more precisely, it's mysticism that forms ethics."<sup>4</sup> Union with God and fraternal communion are inseparable. One cannot exist without the other. Through the moment of his solidarity with humanity, when he was seemingly far removed from God, the one Mediator reveals a God who is near to all who are lost. The risen-crucified One is the perennial expression of relationship with God and communion between persons.

### *A gratuitous gift*

Paul sought to explain the divine plan manifested through the Risen-Crucified One: Gratuitous justification is meant for every person. For the Pharisees, it was evident that a salvific relationship with God expressed in laws, precepts, and rites, no longer corresponded to God's will, as manifested by the Crucified Jesus. "[W]hen the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" (*Gal* 4:4-6).<sup>5</sup>

For Paul, it was no longer a mere metaphor to be a child of God and one needed to allow him or herself to be "generated" as such. But this was impossible either through human effort or even through a religious person's own knowledge or understanding. Rather, what was needed was faith-filled openness to what God had done through the Crucified One, for the benefit of all. Indeed, for Paul, faith is a true re-creation of the believer. The Risen-Crucified One, in becoming "life-giving Spirit," is that reality through which God communicates and assembles all humankind in unity.

### *A universal opening*

The son/daughter relationship communicated through God's Spirit is founded upon divine *agape*. It is a divine gift; which believers make their own as a personal need. It gives rise to that necessary, filial freedom in front of God that enables this "being one in Christ" in fraternal communion, going beyond all discriminatory boundaries. *Agape* is *gratuitous, unlimited, and open to all*. It is in this self-donating relationship that believers fulfill their

beings as human persons in ever-deepening similarity to Christ (2 Cor 3:18). In other words, relationship with God, "in Christ," is lived out in relationship with others, and in every different reality.

Another of Paul's insights is that of "interpreting mystical experience from a theology of the Cross, one that encompasses a radical incarnation of the divine."<sup>6</sup> The Crucified One is that everlasting reality by which God is near to all of humankind. Therefore, God is close to every human person even when they may be far from Him or still in search of Him (cf. 1 Cor 1:18ss). Agape is limitless. Thus, the face of God can be found in every human person.

### **John: Communion with the divine "we"**

#### *Heart of the New Commandment*

John's focus is on the discourse that took place during the Last Supper. Jesus' words were directed to his disciples as he was preparing to depart from this world. Thus they are teachings addressed to the post-Apostolic Church in every epoch. There, in that moment, came the only commandment explicitly formulated by Jesus: the "new commandment."<sup>7</sup> Jesus invited his disciples to leave behind their old ways of following Him and set aside any nostalgia for a Jesus who was to depart. He then went on to invite them to live fraternal love and, in this way, give witness to others that "they are his disciples." After the resurrection, mutual love would allow the Father and the Son to remain a part of the disciples' lives (cf. Jn 14:23). Through their communion of love, the Risen One would continue giving witness to men and women in every era.

In his First Letter, John refers to the "new commandment" to underline the fundamental importance of remaining rooted in fraternal love: "Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you have had from the beginning; the old commandment is the word that you have heard. Yet I am writing you a new commandment [...] because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. Whoever says, "I am in the light," while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness. Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light, and in such a person there is no cause for stumbling." (1 Jn 2:7s).

Mutual love lived out in community is seen as the true light capable, little by little, of dispersing darkness from the world. Those who love their neighbor do not fall because they have the light to guide them; their faith is clarified and strengthened.<sup>8</sup>

#### *Jesus' prayer for unity*

It is mainly in Jesus' prayer for unity (Jn 17: 21.23) that we find the link between the "being one" of the disciples, Christ, the Father, and that of giving witness to the world. Again, the context is that of Jesus' pending departure from this world.

Before, Jesus' presence had kept the disciples united; how could this unity be maintained when he was no longer with them? A first answer is found in verse 11: Jesus places them under the Father's protection, asking the Father to watch over the disciples! :

“Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.” (*Jn 17:11b*).

Divine protection is “in the Name of the Father,” meaning within the divine space of the Father’s bosom.<sup>9</sup> The Father’s bosom, however, is not a closed off space. Rather, the disciples are called to go forth and be His witnesses without ever leaving this temple of divine presence.

This is further elaborated in verses 20-23 although this “being one” still consists of the same reality. But the prayer is not addressed to the disciples, rather it is to the Father!<sup>10</sup> Thus, unity is not primarily an ideal to be reached, but a reality already given and rooted in the dynamism of divine communion.

Here, Jesus’ prayer concerns not only the first generation of believers, but every post-Apostolic generation to come. “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” (*Jn 17:20-21*).

The idea of “mutual immanence” used by the Apostle Paul also makes clear the meaning of being one “as we are one”: I signifies you in me and I in you, with such a measure of reciprocal love that one is the other’s transparency. Thus the reality, “anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (*Jn 14:9*). That is the foundation, source and model of the Christian community. It is its profound identity and its perennial ideal of mutual love.

Thus, the gift of unity necessarily leads to universality. Throughout the centuries, thanks to the witness of mutual love in the community which revealed the face of God to all humanity, humankind was given the possibility to open itself up to faith.

The gift of unity gives the community its true identity, one of a relational dynamic between believers in divine Communion, and in relation to all the rest of humanity. Unity is also taken up again in the following verses: “The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” (*Jn 17: 22-23*).

Once again, John uses the idea of mutual immanence. In this case, however, in a vertical direction between Believers – Christ – the Father: “I in them and you in me.” Jesus present in every believer and in the Father at the same time. He is the mediator. Through him, the relationship between believers and God-Abba takes place.

One notes coherent use of the idea of mutual immanence. Jesus never uses it for relationships between believers: I, in my neighbor, and the latter in me. Similarly, he never attributes such reciprocity between believers with the Father. As the Mediator, Jesus is always at the center of every encounter between brothers/sisters and the encounter with God. Once reconciled in Christ, believers live a communion, one of fraternity in a filial relationship with God.

In the prayer found in John 17 the theme of love appears here for the first time: it is a love mediated by Christ for his disciples. It is the same love with which the Father loves

the Son. It is not solely God's merciful love, patient and always ready to forgive, but a love that also generates. This divine love through faith leads the community toward the Father's bosom, and now it must become visible in fraternal communion. The community is called to witness not only by means of the Word but through a life of unity, a life in which divine love is indwelling: the mystery of unity of the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ. Without this witness of unity, the Church's missionary vocation is sterile.

## Conclusion

Can we define the life of faith as a "mysticism of the we"?

### *An overturning of traditional mysticism*

The term "mystic" is loaded with meaning. It can refer to charismatic phenomena like speaking in tongues or ecstasy experiences, or the moment of Paul "being caught up to the third heaven" (2 Cor 12: 2-6). Traditional mysticism has been a matter of journeying toward union with God. One is aware of moving between two divine poles: God's presence in the heart of the believer and that of his transcendence. Here, there are some risks: one is giving excessive importance to ascetic practices as the pathway to union with God and one's own perfection. This can lead to strongly individualistic approaches that entail solitude, detachment, and a moving away from earthly realities, including one's neighbors. There can also be the risk of forgetting the gift of filial relationship with God which is already complete from the first moment of one's faith journey and signifies the deepest union with God. It is not the fruit of an interior itinerary, even though full union with God lies in the future and does not depend on human effort. Instead, our lives need to bear witness to our being through grace, and therefore in allowing the Artist to work!

Traditional mysticism is overturned: The pathway to reach union with God is no longer one of an inner life lived in solitude, which in reality, has already been granted to us through faith. Rather, it is the Spirit's life-giving force through the Risen One alive in the heart of every believer, and every human reality. It could be said that God's presence grows through an *exodus* towards one's neighbors and all of creation.

### *A "lay" alliance between God and the human person*

Through the discovery of Jesus Forsaken, Chiara Lubich grasped the important reality of "being co-crucified" as found in Paul's ethical teachings and reveals its ultimate consequence. Jesus Forsaken (that is, the value of the cry of forsakenness uttered by the Crucified Jesus) is not seen solely as a model for ascetics to reach union with God. But rather it also entails stripping one's self from the certainty of his/her relationship with God in order to encounter every brother or sister. The greatest of love for one's neighbor lies in the greatest of love for God. What comes about, so to speak, is a lay alliance between God and the human person in every circumstance, in every encounter. Sacred space or consecrated time is no longer required. In Jesus Forsaken, the encounter between God and humanity becomes immediate everywhere.

## *The communitarian dimension of being in Christ*

Obviously, it's impossible not to mention the communitarian, ecclesial dimension of "being in Christ." Paul links it to Baptism: "For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit." (1 Cor 12:13; cf. Gal 3:28). Through Baptism, the believer is introduced into an already existing ecclesial reality of "being one in Christ," as "we." "Being in Christ" entails being close to one another through the bond of Christ's Spirit (cf. Gal 3:26ss; 1 Cor 10:16s, etc.). It is a relational closeness more than a physical one. Remember John's words: "No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us." (1 Jn 4:12). That is, our love for God reaches its fullness. Paradoxically, we journey along an inner pathway that unites us to God precisely by going out of ourselves to love our neighbor. It is a journey that allows us to participate in His relational life and coincides with our humanization (becoming a "human person" through self-giving). As John affirms, the ecclesial "we" becomes the divine "we": "we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ." (1 Jn 1, 3).

"In Christ", all believers are called to this 'ordinary-extraordinary' experience of God not only at the end of long, ascetic journeys, but throughout their entire lives.

## **Endnotes**

- <sup>1</sup> In Mt 22:36: "Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"
- <sup>2</sup> Cf. Romano Penna, *Problemi e natura della mistica paolina*, in *L'apostolo Paolo. Studi di esegesi e teologia*, Ed. Paoline, Cinisello Balsamo 1991, pp. 630ss.; Daniel Marguerat, *Paolo il mistico*, in *Paolo negli Atti e Paolo nelle lettere*, Claudiana, Turin 2016, pp. 183ss.
- <sup>3</sup> Albert Schweitzer wrote: "Ethics are a manifestation that result from being dead and risen with Christ" (*Die Mystik des Apostels Paulus*, Tübingen 1930, p. 220).
- <sup>4</sup> Penna, *L'apostolo Paolo*, cit., p. 666.
- <sup>5</sup> In the parallel text Romans 8:15, we read: "The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father'." Paul makes clearer what could have been misunderstood: it is not the Spirit who cries out "Abbà," but the believer and the Spirit in him. [The Spirit does not cry out Abbà since he is not the Son!]
- <sup>6</sup> Marguerat, *Paolo il mistico*, cit., p. 199.
- <sup>7</sup> John chose the Greek adjective *kainos* which means new, as well as diverse, and therefore a qualitative novelty, and not the adjective *neos* which refers to the near past, that is something that did not exist before.
- <sup>8</sup> John used the contrasts: to love/to hate. In Hebrew, to hate the brother does not necessarily refer to a feeling but could also refer to a denial of a relationship out of contempt or lack of interest.
- <sup>9</sup> Probably the preposition "in" here refers to a place.
- <sup>10</sup> Moreover the evangelist did not use the verb "to become" but "to be" in the present tense.