

A new step in the history of Christian spirituality

Seeking, finding and experiencing God

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While visiting the international city of Loppiano on May 10, 2018, Pope Francis underlined the need to promote an evangelical mysticism of “the we” as indispensable for building a “...global civilization of fraternity.” In this way, Pope Francis is expressing a step ahead in the journey of Christian spirituality. His words also mirror Pope John Paul II’s affirmation: in order to respond to today’s challenges, it is necessary to aim at living a spirituality of communion.

During his meeting with the community of the Focolare movement at Loppiano, Italy, Pope Francis stated: “The charism of unity is a providential stimulus and a powerful support for experiencing this evangelical mystic of ‘the we’, that is, walking together in the history of the men and women of our time as ‘of one heart and soul’ (cf. Acts 4:32), discovering and loving concretely those ‘members of one another’ (cf. Rom 12:5). Jesus prayed to the Father for this: ‘that they may all be one as you and I are one’ (cf. Jn 17:21), and in himself he showed us the way, up to the complete gift of all in the abyssal emptying of the cross (cf. Mk 15:34; Phil 2:6-8). It is the spirituality of ‘the we’ .”

The evangelical mysticism of the ‘the we.’ Years ago, in an article written shortly before his death, Karl Rahner recognized that “fraternal communion where it is possible to have the same basic experience of the Spirit . . . is an essential element of a spirituality of the future.” He considered the experience of the first Pentecost of the Church, “. . . as an event that certainly was not a casual meeting of a group of individualistic mystics. Rather, it was an experience of the Spirit made by a community.” It was a model for a collective experience of the Holy Spirit. At the same time Rahner recognized the “elders” reservations in the face of this phenomenon: “We elders have been predominantly individualists, given our origins and formation.”, because up to now, “. . . true spirituality, the ‘mystic’ understood as a clearly personal event taking place in solitary meditation, is the experience of a personal conversion during spiritual exercises done in solitude, in a cloister cell, and so on and so forth.”¹

Seeking God Within

This predominantly personal, and in a certain sense ‘solitary’ approach rooted in monastic spirituality, has characterized Christian mysticism for centuries. It’s well-known that already in

¹ K. Rahner, Elements of spirituality in the Church of the future, in T. Golfi - B. Secondin (eds.) *Problemi e prospettive di spiritualità* Queriniana, Brescia 1983, pp. 439-441; 434-436. (own translation)

the 4th century (and followed later by St. Anthony the Abbot, St. Benedict and many other saints and founders) monks sought union with God in solitude. They withdrew from the world and each one recollected himself in God in his private, interior cell and then, chorally, all together. This spirituality led thousands to holiness and enriched the Church with a powerful patrimony of mystical experiences. It was a way centered primarily on the first commandment of love - "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind and with all your strength" (Mark 12:30) - by which many monks reached the point of 'transforming union'. By seeking God and his countenance with total dedication and extreme faithfulness, they were 'assimilated' by God and transformed in Him little by little, becoming in this way light for the world.

In their sincere search for God alone, founders of monastic orders found themselves more frequently surrounded by persons moved by a desire to follow in their footsteps and live for God together with them. In their rules, they often exhorted followers to live in harmony and mutual love: "Let the monks . . . in honor . . . forerun one another. . . . Let them practice fraternal charity with a chaste love."² and "That they may vie with one another in mutual esteem."³ The love of God inspired monks to live mutual love. And, thus, monasteries became light, salt and leaven for the world. In fact, during the tumultuous times after the Roman Empire's fall, it was monasteries, through the work of monks, that gradually built up Western Christianity. The brilliance of the Benedictine spirituality, for example, served to shape European culture and is the reason that St. Benedict was named Patron of Europe.⁴

Focusing their lives on the first commandment of love, monastic spirituality led its followers to live mutual love among themselves and pour forth this love onto those they came into contact with. It's the logic of the Gospel, in that every spirituality, because it is a word of The Word, contains within it the entire Gospel and thus participates in the universal mission of salvation.

Finding God through our neighbor

Christian spirituality -- which in a certain sense had taken refuge in the desert and in cloisters -- finds its way back into the world during the era of St. Francis and St. Dominic and encounters humanity along new pathways. In Europe, the era of urban development begins and we find a "new type of Christian." They are "the friars", who travel two by two announcing to all the good news of the Kingdom. Francis kissing the leper symbolizes an "anthropological turning point" that would characterize the entire history of Christian spirituality in the second millennium.⁵ With the advent of Humanism and the end of the Renaissance, there was no turning back and this turning point would characterize the search for God in solitude that was typical of monks and

² *The Rule of St. Benedict* 72, 4-11.

³ Cf. *Ibid.* 63,17.

⁴ His *Rule*, marked by equilibrium with an understanding of the human person, has in fact had an enormous influence. Cf. L. Moulin, *Le monde vivant des religieux*, Calman-Levy, Paris 1964.

⁵ Cf. F. Ciardi, *La parabola dei tre comandamenti (The parable of the three commandments)*, in "Nuova Umanita'" 27 (2005/2) n. 158, pp.309-333. Id., *Tre comandamenti per una triplice presenza di Cristo (Three commandments for a tripling presence of Christ)*, in AA.VV., *Egli e' vivo! La presenza del Risorto nella comunita' cristiana (He is alive! The presence of the Risen One in the christian community)*, M. Vandeleene (ed.) Citta' Nuova, Rome 2006, pp. 11-34.

mystics of that era.⁶ By living the second commandment of love – “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Mt. 22:39) – that called each one to recognize and serve Jesus in their neighbor, many saints like John of God, Camillus de Lellis, Vincent de Paul, Don Bosco, Joseph Cottogno, and Mother Teresa of Calcutta reached the heights of union with God. In this way, the human person once again became “the way of the Church”⁷ and “...for those who do not love a brother and sister whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen” (1 John 4:20) became clearly evident to all.

These founders also encouraged their followers to live charity and unity. St. Vincent de Paul wrote: “Be united and God will bless you. But do this through the charity of Jesus Christ . . . Possess his same sentiments, his same will . . . God is calling you to work in his vineyard. Go therefore, having within you his same heart, his very same intention, and with this you will gather much fruit.”⁸ Like in the monasteries, they, too, reached the point of reciprocity in charity. Their communities and their works were often authentic “heavenly oases” in the desert of the world, open doors onto paradise. And they continue to be so today as well.

Experiencing God’s presence in relationship with others

Historically, Christian spirituality in the first millennium was characterized by monastic spirituality, whereas the second millennium saw the emergence of many spiritualities focused on loving Jesus in one’s neighbor. The third millennium began with John Paul II’s invitation to foster a spirituality of communion everywhere: “To make the Church *the home and the school of communion*: that is the great challenge facing us in the millennium which is now beginning, if we wish to be faithful to God’s plan and respond to the world’s deepest yearnings . . . A spirituality of communion indicates above all the heart’s contemplation of the mystery of the Trinity dwelling in us, and whose light we must also be able to see shining on the face of the brothers and sisters around us. A spirituality of communion also means an ability to think of our brothers and sisters in faith within the profound unity of the Mystical Body, and therefore as ‘those who are a part of me’. This makes us able to share their joys and sufferings, to sense their desires and attend to their needs, to offer them deep and genuine friendship.” (NMI, 43).

The evangelical mysticism of “the we” spoken about by Pope Francis moves along this same wavelength of a spirituality of communion. What is new in this spirituality? Father Jesus Castellano expressed it well in a letter written to Chiara Lubich about the spirituality of unity. He wrote: “In the history of Christian spirituality it has been affirmed: ‘Christ is in me, He lives in me.’ This is from the perspective of an individual spirituality, of life in Christ. It’s also stated: ‘Christ is present in our neighbors’ and we develop the perspective of charity, of the works of charity. But, usually the decisive step is lacking: to discover that if Christ is in me and in my

⁶ Not by chance, St. Theresa of Avila, as opposed to other mystics who preceded her, insisted continually on the importance of meditating on the humanity of Christ in order to reach union with God (cf. A. Sicari, *Contemplativi per la Chiesa. L’itinerario Carmelitano di S. Teresa di Gesu’*, Ediz. O.C.D., Rome, 1983, pp. 79-108).

⁷ “This man is the primary route that the Church must travel in fulfilling her mission: he is the primary and fundamental way for the Church, the way traced out by Christ himself, the way that leads invariably through the mystery of the Incarnation and the Redemption” (John Paul II, *Redemptor hominis*, 14).

⁸I.Giordani, *San Vincenzo de Paoli. Servo dei poveri*, Vincenziane, Rome, 1959, p. 133 (own translation).

neighbor, then Christ in me loves Christ who is in you and vice versa . . . and there is both a giving and a receiving.”⁹

In this way of communion, we journey together to reach the peaks of union with God ‘bound together’, united to one another as members of the same body. Therefore, we are careful to establish relationships with our brothers and sisters imbued with this mutual, constant charity. Whenever possible, we’re called to give priority to this mutual love, as the Apostle Peter admonished: “Above all, maintain constant love for one another.” (1 Peter 4:8). Just as we love God in ourselves, recollecting ourselves in Him in the depth of our “interior castle” as St. Teresa of Avila speaks of, we love God in our brothers and sisters in the same way when we are with them. Through the beauty of such relationships with others, we build an “exterior castle” where God can reign.¹⁰ This is the wonderful and life-changing experience that today’s Church is re-discovering: God’s special presence wherever reciprocity, wherever Jesus’ new commandment, is lived out and relationships rooted in the life of the Trinity are established. It is God’s tangible presence in our interpersonal relationships; God in the midst of those who are united through Love and in Love (cf. Mt. 18:20). In this light, it’s possible to understand the importance of the Pope’s invitation to follow the way of an “evangelical mysticism of ‘the we’.”

Through love we abide in God and love gives value to everything: “...but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is perfected in us.” (1 John 4:12). Thus, in order to experience the Spirit of Jesus, it’s enough to meet another person with whom we have agreed to seriously live mutual love out of love for God. Coming together with others who live unity in this way is an experience of finding oneself with Jesus wherever we are, whether at home, at work, in a stadium, or on a street.¹¹ Meeting others in this way becomes a moment of communion with God and the relationship with them is a source of grace and of union with God. Persons who are united with Jesus in this way fulfill the Church’s vocation to be: “. . . in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race.” (LG, 1; cf. also NMI, 42).

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⁹ J. Castellano, *Lettera a Chiara Lubich a proposito della spiritualita’ collettiva (dell’unita’) dell’Opera id Maria*, 21 giugno 1992, in C. Lubich, *Una via nuova (A new way)*, Citta’ Nuova, Rome 2002, p. 14 (own translation).

¹⁰ Cf. C. Lubich, *La dottrina spirituale (Essential writings)*, Mondadori, Milano 2001, p.74; Citta’ Nuova, Rome 2006, p. 72.

¹¹ Cf. C. Lubich - I. Giordani, *Erano i tempi di guerra (It was time of war)*, Citta’ Nuova, Rome 2007, p. 22.