

From your heart to God's ear

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"The heart has its reasons which reason knows nothing of."
Blaise Pascal in *Thoughts* – published posthumously in 1669.

This expression has been quoted often, but perhaps not always with the exact sense that the author intended. For Pascal, to whom Pope Francis dedicated an apostolic letter last June on the 400th anniversary of his birth¹, the concept was certainly not about superficial sentimentality, but an observation that reason alone cannot guide our lives. There are other and deeper dimensions.

Head and heart, understood respectively as the seat of thought and the seat of feelings, have always been dimensions of human existence and might sometimes appear to be in a state of tension with each other but they are actually complementary. Knowing how to synthesize them and how to integrate them with each other is human maturity. Yet, the road that unites them is among the longest and sometimes most rocky.

Depending on the culture and tradition, more weight is given to one or the other dimension. In particular, among young people today life and the search for God itself no longer follows the rational approach that was customary in the past. Experience counts more than arguments. What you feel, touch, taste and experience predominate and are the ultimate guarantee of authenticity.

It is worth taking a look at Jesus' feelings. According to Gospels, he weeps and rejoices, feels compassion and indignation, shouts and is silent, is sorrowful to death and experiences anguish, enjoys food, knows how to celebrate, cultivates male and female friendships. He is a real man!

Against this background, the Apostle Paul speaks to the Philippians of Christ's "feelings" (Greek: *phronein*) and, more interestingly, how his "feelings" should also inform those of his followers (cf. Phil 2:5). Surprisingly, expressions and words such as "emptying oneself", "serving", "humbling" and even "obeying" (cf. vv. 7-8) – inner attitudes – are not the point of arrival but a passage to being "exalted", being "above all things". In line with this process, Paul invites believers to have the same sentiments among themselves: to become *sympsychoi*, having the same feeling (cf. v. 2; Rom 12:16).

There is therefore a typically Christian way of living our feelings: not to suppress them but to welcome them as part of us, knowing at the same time, that we must transcend them in an ever new passage from *I* to *you* for a *we*; from rejoicing and from suffering to suffer-with and rejoice-with, as Paul says: "If one member suffers, all the members suffer together; and if one member is honoured, all the members rejoice with him" (1 Cor 12:26).

This is only possible if we undertake the passage from ourselves to God at the same time, with the confidence of children who know that they can present themselves entirely to the Father. "Pour out your hearts to him", recommends Psalm 62:9. Similarly, the First Letter of Peter invites us to "pour out all your worries upon him, for he cares for you" (5:7). The German bishop and theologian Klaus Hemmerle titled one of his books on prayer with a similar idea: "Your heart to the ear of God" [1].

Our feelings must therefore be interpreted and managed according to three fundamental coordinates: listening to one's own heart, knowing at the same time how to listen to the feelings of others and, throughout all this, letting God listen and read and transform our heart.

This theme is the focus of this issue of *Ekklesia* develops from a variety of viewpoints. The intention is an attempt to make a small contribution to a 'grammar' of feelings. This is necessary in our age of fast and superficial communication where we often do not know how to listen or interpret and to discern what we feel - a phenomena which we can easily lead to being overwhelmed rather than being animated, motivated and helped.

We are convinced that a mature management of feelings and their integration into a life decidedly marked by the Gospel is not only among the prerequisites for human fulfilment and happiness but also among the most effective antidotes to the abuse dramas that trouble the life of the Church and of society. There is no doubt that such integration is greatly fostered by a strong and authentic Community experience. We hope that the insights, reflections and testimonies in this issue can make us understand how the Christian community can be a privileged space for this.

We offer these pages to our readers, always grateful for their feedback that have been particularly alive in response to the last issue of *Ekklesia* (*Believing: possible in today's world?*) and that are a valuable contribution to the journey and programming of the magazine.

1 Pope Francis, *Sublimitas et miseria hominis*, Apostolic Letter on the four-hundredth anniversary of the birth of Blaise Pascal, 19 June 2023.

2 The title of the original German work is: *Dein Herz an Gottes Ohr. Einübung ins Gebet*, Herder, Freiburg i. Br. 1986.

