

"This is no time to treat with God for things of little importance"

With this number, we begin a reflection (which is also a study) on religious life. It will continue throughout 2010. Places and circumstances: the desert and solitude. How and when the concept of vows began; their development; how they are lived today. The strong call to the person of Jesus. Personal commitment must become community commitment. Interiority, prayer and work; other ways that help us to meditate.

During the first three centuries of Christian tradition, vows as we know them today did not exist. Doubtless, consecration to the Gospel had all the significance of a total gift of oneself to God, as we see in the lives of the martyrs of that epoch, especially women. When the mothers and fathers of the desert took up their way of life, following an intuition that they had the right to live the Gospel in all simplicity, they made no public profession or even private vows. At this time, no "covenant" or "promises" were spoken of. There was more reference to the commandments than to the evangelical counsels as we understand them today. The intuition came from simple contemplation of the Church. Christianity's power was beginning to grow. It was no longer the Christianity of the diaspora, with its followers gathered in s-

mall groups in different parts of the Roman empire. No, Christianity, after having passed through times of great change, was celebrating a marriage with temporal power, and to be a Christian was a guarantee of social privilege.

The life of the first anchorites was a new shoot, a dream of an alternative way of living. Our mothers and fathers in the faith conceived an idea and opened a road, a journey, which, as Machado said in his poem, "is made by journeying". They began a rhythm which has inspired many men and women through the centuries, a perpetual "utopia", in the deepest and widest sense, a search for a land without sin. This in itself is not the Kingdom: it is a dream of perfection which is like a distant horizon. As the poet Eduardo Galeano says: *I advance two steps, and the horizon moves*



Ancient fresco of the hermit St Onofrio

two steps away. I go forward ten steps, and the horizon retreats ten steps. What, then, is the purpose of utopia? It makes us advance!

Their dream began in a real-life situation, with no concept of vows as yet. It was built around the simple desire for authenticity and love of the Gospel, the life of Jesus. It contains several

aspects which are like foundational pillars on which this dream is built, shaped and reformed.

The desert

Their first idea was to go into the desert, which we can call *geographical location*. This is most important in the religious life of the early centuries as it slowly developed out of desert-experience. Official Christianity had already begun its expansion in the centre of contemporary political and social power, where the institutional Church and her official representatives took their place.

For these first men and women seekers after God, the marriage between Christianity and political power gave no possibility of living the Gospel and being bound to Jesus by evangelical freedom and love. Because of this, they humbly claimed a place apart: the desert, which we could interpret as the margins of our world throughout history. They understood that to embrace evangelical simplici-

ty meant breaking contact with this "marriage" and finding a place of physical separation. The desert became a meaningful place where they could begin again, a place which symbolised removal from the centre of power. This is the viewpoint from which we can interpret the ancient image of religious life being "a flight from the world". These people really were fleeing the world, fleeing the centre of power, distancing themselves from vain things, from human plans for material prosperity. The desert was meaningful to their search, a marginalised place of hopes and dreams.

But the desert had another significance. It was a barren place which enabled encounter, a space for growing in sensitivity. It had a reality which became part of their "geography", their own habitat, a reality not of their own devising, a reality they had to "follow", and which attracted and seduced them. Like all people who dwell in silent places, they learned to listen, and to recognise the delicate footsteps

of the Divine Presence, the Divine Absence. The desert is the place of consciousness, the place of poverty, the place of powerlessness where contacts are few. This powerlessness leads us to entrust ourselves to Another, living in constant vigil until recognition takes place. The desert gives us the option of a fixed location, seeing and enjoying divine companionship to the utmost... Like the first fathers and mothers of the desert, Teresa of Avila (to give but one example), seeking a place to experience the freshness of the "primitive rule" would say: "*This is no time to treat with God for things of little importance*".

Solitude

We are all born out of an experience of solitude. Even if we live together, even if we live and share a common charism, solitude is one of our most meaningful supports, a life-resource which above all signifies a recovery of unity. The first hermits were experts in harmonious, unified living. Solitude is not an experience of loneliness, but of oneness with everyone and everything. John recounts the words of Jesus, who has the same feeling. (Jn 17:11)

The choice of solitude gave them the opportunity of a living experience of this unity, even among the lions of the desert. It is Isaiah's dream of messianic peace (Is 11) in which differing entities learn to live together: "*The wolf will live with the lamb, the panther lie down with the kid, calf and young lion will feed together, and a little boy will lead them. The cow and the bear will graze, their young will*

The Sahara desert at sunset





Giotto, *The Magdalen as a hermit in the grotto of St Baume*: Basilica of St Francis, Assisi. The fresco portrays the priest-monk presenting her with a hermit's garment

lie down together, the lion will eat hay like the ox. The infant will play over the den of the adder, the baby will put his hand into the viper's lair. No hurt, no harm will be done on all my holy mountain". How can we recover the option of the sense of solitude? How can we restore the sense of solitude as a way of returning to harmony and unity? Even at our organisational level it has the good meaning of *not having idols*. Christianity was beginning to have need of many resources for living the faith; the hermits said they had need of nothing, only the need of perseverance in the search for God. Solitude means "I have no other gods". When Teresa and other mystics say this, they mean, *You come into life with all your dreams, all your passion; and all the others come in too, not to be masters but to be your companions*. To want neither idols nor privileges is authentic morality. It is born not from the arrogance of those who think they will do everything by themselves, but from the experience

of "God alone suffices", which is a declaration of love in an intense feeling for life.

Scripture and memory

The contact of the fathers and mothers of the desert with the Word was through listening, particularly for the women. They did not have books, and the majority of women could not read. Some hermits at times went down to the churches, listened to the Word of God, and then returned to the desert. Their contact with scripture had to be through memory. To nourish themselves, above all through reading, they had to memorise. This is how the poor live!

In a precarious human world, few things were written: memory was the communicator, and brought things back to mind. For the fathers and mothers of the desert, the most effective expression of prayer was what tradition calls, "the prayer of the heart". They learned verses of the Scriptures so that they could

repeat them over and over until they felt within themselves the warmth of the mystery and wonder. As Thomas Merton said, "*we become contemplatives when God reveals himself in us*".

This is lived experience. Repetition is considered important in mystical or spiritual teaching. Repetition of gestures, making contact with the text, interchanging them until our inner world is warmed through. In Psalm 85 we read "*I will hear what the Lord God has to say... a voice that speaks of peace; peace for his people and his friends*". In this verse we see the people of Israel pacing rhythmically along, listening and remembering. It is a scripture memory which brings back memories of their history and resounds like a call from God. The power of the words remains engraven in their hearts. In the same way, John witnesses to what he has seen and heard and his hands have touched - the Word of Life (1Jn 1:1).

Work

In the history of religious life, work was always one of the most important elements, and was institutionalised in western monasticism by St Benedict. From the beginning cenobites had the possibility of keeping their daily rhythm within the rhythm of the cosmos, and work for them was part of a cosmic whole, part of God's work, not simply a problem for human beings as they progress through history. From this viewpoint, they were working in solidarity with the universe and with God, but also with a profound sense

of not being dependent on others. They wanted to take their share of daily toil, knowing that all they needed was to earn their daily bread. Work in this sense was a sign of dignity and of not asking for more than was needed, and which allowed others to work and live. Work gave them a mystical solidarity: a share in the work of creation.

And it is in the general interest, for we all have to make adjustments with life's elements and work with them. We have to decide how to relate to life, how to encourage and take care of it. This sapiential aspect could help us to rethink our relationship with material things, and with life itself.

Now for an ancient wisdom story of the Greek fathers. A brother went in search of Abbot Silvano on Mount Sinai, and seeing the brothers working, he said to the abbot, *They should not be working for the bread which perishes (Jn 6:27) and indeed, Mary chose the part that was best (Lk 10:42).*

The old man said to his disciple:

Painting of St Benedict and the monks at table



Zaccharia, give a book to your brother here, and take him to an empty cell. When the hour for None arrived, the brother looked towards the door to see if anyone was coming to take him to lunch, but no-one called him; so he got up, went to find the abbot, and said, Abbot, have the brothers eaten? The old man replied, Yes, they have eaten. The brother said, Then why did they not call me? The old man replied, Because you are a spiritual man and have no need of food, but we, who are fleshly beings, need to eat material food. Hearing these words, the brother showed his repentance, saying, Forgive me, Father Abbot. The old man said to him, Mary has absolute need of Martha; even better, it is thanks to Martha that Mary was raised up.

Penitence expressed as patience

There are many monastic writings which present the whole experience of life as penitential. The experience of waiting and controlled passion, to which tradition gives the name patience, is exemplified in religious life, where men and women adopt a slow rhythm in their meeting with life. Patience has nothing to do with being passive in the face of reality; on the contrary, it has to do with passion, and it is an attitude which allows us to hope; to hope for a meeting with reality, to hope that things will reveal themselves and explain their significance. We could say that the best - even if painful - kind of penitence (in the mystical sense) is waiting. Patient people engage with life,



Cistercian monks at work

and wait. They take examples from Scripture: God's patience in the Old Testament, that of Jesus in the New Testament. It is an attitude of remaining open to people and possessions without possessing them. It is a slow, measured approach to life, but an active slowness which has the effect of speeding things up. And it is an ascesis which later, in several religious orders, will be united with study.

The religious aspect of life

We find that the dream of building a harmonious life, that which we call religious life, is simply an opening of our eyes to the religious aspect of all life. It is a recognition that the world is supremely indwelt, and that life is deeply spiritual. This is where the lifestyle we call Religious Life comes from. It was an alternative lifestyle to the Christianity of the first centuries and it spoke of the desert, the dream of unity and communion, anti-idolatry.... The vows too are means of holding on to everything that has been given to us, for guarding the significance of life's religious aspects and of that "something" which evokes the mysterious presence of God. The vows are a means to teach us to

live. This lifestyle is essentially born from longing to return: because each of us returns, as all people return. The cry of psalm 126 is a cry of prisoners longing to return home, a dream which becomes a reality. For those who have not yet returned, we ask God to help them to carry on dreaming.

Religious life takes shape around this dream. The vows are an attempt to live it, for the dream comes true in its realisation. It is like an echo which changes into an invitation: *Make your own the mind of Christ Jesus* (Phil 2:5). The same mind means, the same feelings, the same perceptions, increased awareness in recognition, listening and memory, certain that God shares, and that he hides nothing from the prophets, the just, or his friends (Am 3:7). The dream allows our hearts to beat, it is the desire to understand, to see, to touch, to feel... Many mystics begin and end their reading of scripture by kissing the book itself. *Lord, open my lips*, which we say at the beginning of each day, is a desire for contact.

Making vows as an act of religion

In biblical history, the word "vows" did not exist. The Hebrew words were: pact, covenant, promise. In the Gospels the word is not found: Jesus did not ask his disciples to make vows, much less the people. Above all, he did not ask for sacrifices. The word "vow" appears only once in the New Testament, referring to Paul cutting his hair because he had made a "vow" (Ac 18:18). This

means that we have to justify our taking of vows by something interior, something not specific to a chosen few, but something which belongs to everyone's restless searchings and their harmony with the divine dream. The best texts for illustrating our choice come from psalms 22; 16; 116; 35; 18 and 40. In them we see how the vows form the people. They pronounce vows to help them through difficult situations. The most appropriate time for taking vows was the pilgrimage to the sanctuary. This was a dynamic context of search, where desire to reach the sanctuary is so that vows may be fulfilled. Our Latin American people recognise themselves in this experience, inspired to take vows by their historical experience. Desire to take a vow is born from a moral and mystical unease, it grows from the questions: Where are you? Where do you live? Where can I find you? And when? Vows are not an end; they are simply a means. They become part of our frailty, and we assume them so that they may lead us to knowledge of the mystery.

We have many reasons for saying that we live in a time of urgency and discomfort. But people who live in this post-modern period of history have a common dream: they want to live in loving relationships with others, in non-violent communities, without social distinctions. They want to live in situations of justice, where issues are more than mere survival, and they desire that each person should make a commitment to justice in their own surroundings. They dream of being able to take part in the

building of human history, to be law-abiding and to be shapers of their own lives. We take vows in order to dream with God and with these people, and so as not to abandon either. We need to know our historical context. We are talking of knowledge as the Bible uses the word, intimate knowledge, like two people have in a sexual relationship. We have to make contact with God's story: this is the only "desert" in which we can seek him.

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(First part: to be continued)

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