

**THE MYSTERY
OF
TIME**

By

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MEDITATION ON THE MYSTERY OF TIME

(... but for those who love time is eternity)

Introduction

“Il Sentimento del Tempo” (G. Ungaretti. The sense of time. Life is a journey, a flow, a process... There are stages... There is the need, every now and then, to become aware of the flow of time, to reflect on its transient nature; to relate what is transient to what does not change: meaning, values, God.

Life flows like a river. The image of the river is classic in connection with the passing of time. Leonard of Vinci, the great Renaissance man, wrote:

“The water that you see is the first of the one which goes and the last of the one which comes: such is the present time”.

Also in T. S. Eliot we find the image of the river. To look for the origin, to search for the source of the river is an instinct and a necessity... Going back to the source of the river is to go back to one's childhood. There is the need of re-owning one's childhood; of bringing one's life into unity. There is a consistence in the life of a person between the images of childhood and the achievements of mature age or adulthood. To re-possess one's past is to discover one's history as salvation history.

There is also the image of the river as applied to the life of the community, especially the Church. That was the sense of the celebrations of the Great Jubilee of the year 2000, as it is well expressed by Pope John Paul II: ‘The whole of Christian history appears to us as a single river, into which many tributaries pour their waters.

The year 2000 invites us to gather with a renewed fidelity and ever deeper communion along the banks of this great river: the river of Revelation, of Christianity and of the Church, a river that flows through human history starting from the event which took place at Nazareth and then at Bethlehem two thousand years ago. This is truly the river which with its

streams, in the expression of the psalm, ‘makes glad the city of God’ (40:4)” (TMA, 25).

The river of time has its interruption, its waterfall (according again to an image by T. S. Eliot): it is the irruption of God, of eternity, into the flow of human history through the Incarnation. This “***Intersection***” which divides time and history into two, **Before Christ and After Christ**, is eventually the present in which the irruption of God is actualized in liturgy and prayers.

We shall first **deepen the concept of time** and its implications in relation to salvation history and our individual existence. We shall proceed, in a second movement, to **see how we can pray the “sentiment of time”**

- as *meditation on the transient nature* of our life on earth and all created realities;
- as *thanksgiving* for the time received and redeemed;
- as *repentance* for the time wasted and the missed opportunities;
- as *surrender in God’s hands for the future* which is coming, and invocation to the Spirit of the Risen Christ to bring into unity the dimensions of time in the **sacrament of the present moment**: here and now is the Intersection between Time and Eternity; it is in the present moment that the Divine breaks into Time, when we meet God’s Divine Initiative and it becomes a Call for us.

1.

The concept of time and its articulations

Time is defined as *the measure of the movement according to the before and after*. By movement we do not mean only the physical movement or movement in space, but any movement which implies a development, a growth or an involution, a decay. Then, of course, there come the beginning and the end, birth and death.

The great distinction in matter of time is between the concept of **chronos** and **kairos**. **Chronos** simply marks the succession of happenings according to the measure of the before and after. It is the view of endless

repetition or cycles. It has with it the idea that what happens, happens according to a pattern which will repeat itself and is inevitable.

Fate or *destiny* is associated with this view of time. Life develops in time according to a pre-determined cycle from which no reality can escape. It is a *circular* view of time. It appears easy to understand but, as we are going to see it doesn't explain the whole of reality, especially human freedom and God's initiative.

We have the most striking example of this interpretation of time and life in the Bible, in the book of Qoheleth:

“Vanity of vanities, Qoheleth says. Vanity of vanities. All is vanity! For all his toil under the sun, what does man gain by it? A generation goes, a generation comes, yet the earth stands firm forever. The sun rises, the sun sets; then to its place it speeds and there it rises. Southwards goes the wind, then turns to the north; it turns and turns again; back then to its circling goes the wind. Into the sea all the rivers go, and yet the sea is never filled; and still to their goal the rivers go. All things are wearisome. No man can say that eyes have nor had enough of seeing, ears their fill of hearing. What was will be again; what has been done will be done again; and there is nothing new under the sun. Take anything of which it may be said: ‘Look now, this is new’. Already, long before our time, it existed. Only no memory remains of earlier times, just as in times to come next year itself will not be remembered “ (1:4-11).

Human beings react to this concept of time. Liturgy, and also leisure, take place in the rhythm of time. Rhythmic time is humankind's way of responding to the endless repetition and cyclical meaninglessness of chronological time, which is mere duration.

Kairos is the moment when something new and unexpected happens; something momentous and important which will be pregnant of significance for many. It is a moment of grace, a moment of arrival and a point of departure for other developments.

It is a *sacred time* because it is the place of God's initiative and of human freedom. In the Bible, we have the expression: *the fullness of time*. The fullness of time is caused by the presence of God. In the fullness of time, God sent his only Son to the world, not to condemn the world, but so that the world may be saved through him. It is Jesus who gives the time of his coming its fullness.

The dimensions of time

Time is sacred therefore because it is a **dimension of God's plan of salvation**. In order to accomplish his plan of calling humankind to the sharing of his life, God entered human history through the blessed humanity of Jesus, and through Jesus He shared in our human condition and took active part in the human drama.

The most important moment (**kairos**) is the moment of the Incarnation. It is Eternity entering Time. Thomas S. Elliot, in his famous poems, *The Four Quartets*, calls this moment: INTERSECTION as God's initiative crossed the horizon of man's time.

Time is sacred also because it is a **dimension of Man's development**, especially in his capacity to respond to God's initiative of love and salvation. This capacity is based on human understanding and freedom. These are the traits by which man is recognized as child of God, bearing in himself the image and the likeness of the Creator.

It is because of our freedom and its consequences that the drama of human existence becomes very dramatic indeed. Already in the pagan, pre-Christian world, where **Chronos** is a god who devours his children, there is a sombre, and somehow desperate dramatic character of human life. Man is subject to the whims of blind gods who are the personification of the forces of nature or the basic instincts of man.

But it is only with the widening of the horizon brought about by God's initiative of salvation and the play of the human freedom that the drama becomes real drama and the human destiny acquires its full dimension. This is the "*Symphony of Human Nature*" as it is sometimes called by the artists and writers who have tried to express this human drama in works of fiction (Cfr. Shusako Endo).

The 3 classic dimensions of time are: the Past, the Present, and the Future. They are the ways the plan of God goes into operation and the ways the human creature has the chance of responding to God. They are the dimensions in which the Mystery of Redemption has taken place and is taking place and will be accomplished.

Of these three dimensions, undoubtedly THE PRESENT is the most important as far as the single human being is concerned. It is also important for the community especially in the Liturgy. In the Liturgy the past is actualized through memory (*anamnesis*) and the future is anticipated through expectation (*expectant prayer*) or prophesy.

The Paschal Mystery is experienced through the Liturgy because Christ himself is present and acts through the Church while the Church acts with him.

The Liturgy shapes the present by actualizing the past and summoning the future.

While the saving events of Christ's Incarnation, obedient life, sufferings, death, resurrection, and ascension happened once and for all for our salvation, they are also operative for the present Church and are experienced in a unique but not exclusive way through the liturgy.

Another way is the individual contemplation of these mysteries in prayer. By their nature these saving mysteries that happened once in historical time also transcend historical time in the sense that they are able to be experienced here and now. They endure as saving events; they are not repeated or re-enacted in the Liturgy. The Once-and-for-all Events that occurred in saving history are thus regarded as *trans-temporal* or *meta-historical* in that they are also annually appropriated and fully experienced at particular feasts and seasons such as Easter and Christmas.

Because the salvation experienced in the present Liturgy is of these very same saving mysteries, the term “**actualization of the Paschal Mystery**” is particularly useful to describe what occurs in the liturgy. The theological and spiritual significance of the liturgical commemoration of the Paschal Mystery is that these saving mysteries of Christ offer the faith perspective and the gift of grace through which believers live out, and give meaning to, the fundamental mysteries of human life and salvation, particularly the mysteries of vocation, suffering, and death.

The Acclamations during the Eucharistic Prayer exemplify this:

Dying you destroyed our death,

Rising you restored our life.

Lord Jesus, come in glory.

In the same way, the Preface IV for Sundays in the Ordinary Time:

By his birth we are reborn;

In his suffering we are freed from sin;

By his rising from the dead we rise to everlasting life;

In his return to you in glory we enter into your heavenly kingdom.

This understanding of memorial establishes that the liturgy concerns our experience and continual appropriation of Christ's dying and rising.

The fullness of time

It is time being assumed by God who is eternity. So, according to the Christian view of time, *there are no cycles, there is no re-incarnation, but time flowing from God and going back to God.* Actually, it is the creatures that flow from God and go back to God. Time is like the **stage** on which this movement takes place; on which this drama develops.

Time is of fundamental importance in the Christian view. The centre of time is the time of the Incarnation. Christ is the Alpha and Omega. Christ is the Lord of History. The mystery of time therefore comprises the mission of the Word and the Mission of the Holy Spirit.

The Mission of the Holy Spirit is larger than the Mission of the historical Christ which continues in the Mission of the Church, but not larger of the Mission of the Risen Christ. The Risen Christ is beyond history and he is the Lord who comes in the last day. It is the Risen Christ who gives the Spirit for the coming of the kingdom. He gives his Spirit in the Church and beyond the boundaries of the Church.

Christ is the same yesterday today and forever (*Hebrews 13:8*).

The trans-temporal dimension of the Risen Christ is described in the New Testament: e.g. The Incarnation of the Word in John; The Cosmic Christ in Paul (*Colossians 1: 15-20*).

Christ is the fulfilment of the yearnings of all the world's religions and, as such, he is their sole and definite completion.

By his Incarnation, Christ has united himself, as it were, with every human being who comes into the world. Christ reveals God's plan for all creation and especially for man. He fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear.

Christ is also the revelation of God to mankind, the triune God who is Passion for man.

So, the centre of the Great Jubilee of the year 2000, the object of the celebration, is Jesus Christ and the purpose of the celebration is the glory of the Trinity.

2.

Praying the “Sentiment of Time” (the “Sense of Time”)

1. Meditation on the transient nature of all created realities.

It is a common experience to reflect on the transient nature of all created realities in connection with the passing of time. One of the best examples in the Bible is Psalm 90:

“You can turn men back into dust

by saying: ‘Back to what you were, you sons of man!’

To you, a thousand years are a single day,

a yesterday now over, an hour of the night.

You brush men away like a waking dream,

they are like grass
sprouting and flowering in the morning,
withered and dry before dark ...
our lives are over in a breath:
our life lasts for seventy years,
eighty with good health...
Teach us to count how few days we have
and so gain wisdom of heart.

Another example is the poetical description of old age in the book of Ecclesiastes (Qoheleth), 11:7-10; 12:1-8:

“Light is sweet; at the sight of the sun the eyes are glad. However great the number of the years a man may live, let him enjoy them all, and yet remember that dark days will be many. All that is to come is vanity.

Rejoice in your youth, you who are young;
let your heart give you joy in your young days.
Follow the promptings of your heart
and the desires of your eyes.

But this you must know: for all these things God will bring you to judgement.

Cast worry from your heart,
shield your flesh from pain.

Yet youth, the age of dark hair, is vanity. And remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before evil days come and the years approach when you say: ‘These give me no pleasure’, before sun and light and moon and stars grow dark, and the clouds return after the rain;

the day when those who keep the house tremble
and strong men are bowed;
when the women grind no longer at the mill,
because day is darkening at the windows
and the street doors are shut;
when the sound of the mill is faint,
when the voice of the bird is silenced,
and song notes are stilled,
when to go uphill is an ordeal
and a walk is something to dread.

Yet the almond tree is in flower,
the grasshopper is heavy with food
and the caper bush bears its fruit'

while man goes to his everlasting home. And the mourners are already walking to
and fro in the street

before the silver cord has snapped,
or the golden lamp been broken,

or the pitcher shattered at the spring,
or the pulley cracked at the well,

or before the dust return to the earth as it once came from it, and the breath goes
to God who gave it.

Vanity of vanities, Qoheleth says. All is vanity."

"The book of Qoheleth ends as it began but has covered much ground in between. It has taught men his wretchedness but also his greatness by showing that this world is not worthy of him. It incites the reader to disinterested religion and to that kind of prayer in which a creature, aware of its nothingness, adores the mystery of God" (JB commentary).

2. Prayer for an attitude of detachment:

the meditation on the transient nature of all created realities, and the strong feeling of the caducity of things should favour in us a sense of detachment and inner freedom from clinging in an inordinate way to any creature. This detachment becomes then love for a simple lifestyle. We have many

instances in the Bible of this sense of detachment, especially in the New Testament:

1 Corinthians 7:29-31: “Brothers, this is what I mean: our time is growing short. Those who have wives should live as they had none, and those who mourn should live as though they had nothing to mourn for; those who are enjoying life should live as though there were nothing to laugh about; those whose life is buying things should live as though they had nothing of their own; and those who have to deal with the world should not become engrossed in it. I say this because the world as we know it is passing away”.

1 Timothy 6:7-10: “We brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it; but as long as we have food and clothing, let us be content with that. People who long to be rich are prey to temptation; they get trapped into all sorts of foolish and dangerous ambitions which eventually plunge them into ruin and destruction. The love of money is the root of all evils and there are some who, pursuing it, have wandered away from the faith, and so given their souls any number of fatal wounds:.

Philippians 4:10-15: “It is a great joy to me, in the Lord, that at last you have shown some concern for me again; though of course you were concerned before, and only lacked an opportunity. I am not talking about shortage of money; I have learned to manage on whatever I have. I know how to be poor and I know how to be rich too. I have been through my initiation and now I am ready for anything anywhere, full stomach or empty stomach, poverty or plenty. There is nothing I cannot master with the help of the One who gives me strength”.

3. *Prayer of Thanksgiving* for the gifts received and *Prayer of Repentance* for the lost opportunities. Time is the basic gift which is the same as life. Life is time. Time is given to us in order to live and love; in order to welcome Christ in our life and struggle to become like him. If we do not do that, we waste our time and miss the opportunity which is within the gift of time. Time is a gift and the gift within the gift is opportunity.

4. *Prayer of surrender* in God's hands for the future which is coming; *and Invocation* to the Spirit of the Risen Christ to bring into unity the dimensions of time in the **sacrament of the present moment**.

Here and now is the Intersection between time and Eternity; it is in the present time that the Divine breaks into time, when we meet God's initiative and it becomes a Call for us. This takes place in PRAYER. There we have two movements: an effort to look inside (*Spiritual Life*) and an effort to look beyond (*to transcend, to look at Eternal Life*, at the reality of God, at the reality of Christ's Divinity, at Jesus risen from the dead, at Mama Mary and the Saints in Heaven, our homeland...).

3.

We shall consider three texts which express in a very profound manner, this dimension of surrendering to the present and to the depth of God's Presence in the call to love, here and now:

I.

"My end is my beginning" (From: *Four Quarters* by T.S. Eliot (1988-1965):

What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from. And every phrase
And sentence that is right (where every word is at home,
taking its place to support the others,
The word neither diffident nor ostentatious,
An easy commerce of the old and the new,
The common word exact without vulgarity,
The formal word precise but not pedantic,
The complete consort dancing together)
Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning,
Every poem an epitaph. And any action
Is a step to the block, to the fire, down the sea's throat
Or to an illegible stone: and that is where we start.
We die with the dying:

See, they depart, and we go with them.
We are born with the dead:
See, they return, and bring us with them.

The moment of the rose and the moment of the yew-tree
Are of equal duration. A people without history
Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern
Of timeless moments. So, while the light fails
On a winter's afternoon, in a secluded chapel
History is now and England.

With the Drawing of this Love and the voice of this
Calling

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
Through the unknown, remembered gate
When the last of earth left to discover
Is that which was the beginning;
At the source of the longest river
The voice of hidden waterfall
And the children in the apple-tree
Not known, because not looked for
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness
Between two waves of the sea.
Quick, now, here, now, always--
A condition of complete simplicity
(Costing not less than everything)
And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well
When the tongues of flame are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.

Notes:

1. Julian of Norwich, famous woman mystic of the English tradition (XV century), is the author of the phrase: "All shall be well and all manner of things shall be well".
2. Intersection: it is the breaking into time of the Divine with Christ's Incarnation. It is the revelation of the Love of God which become a Call and happens every moment, in the present instant.

3. In the poem, we find *images of childhood*: they have now become symbols:

- the *rose* and the *yew-tree* are the two aspects of life: beauty, delicacy; strength, pain, roughness;
- the *river*, the *tide* are symbol of the passing time and the *waterfall* is the interruption, the intersection.
- the children in the apple tree are the symbol of humanity in its basic instinct and drive for happiness.

II.

“But for those who love time is eternity”:
a song by Fr. John Kavanaugh sj:

Time is too slow for those who wait,
Time is too fast for those who fear.
Time is too long for those who mourn,
Time is too short for those who rejoice.
But for those who love, time is eternity.

*All things have their time,
and all things pass away.
O Lord, I have loved your Life and your World.*

A time to be born and a time to die;
A time to kill and a time to give life;
A time to plant and a time to pluck off the fruit.
A time to destroy and a time to build.
But for those who love, time is eternity.

A time to weep and a time to laugh;
A time to scatter and a time to gather;
A time to dance and a time to mourn;
A time to embrace and a time to be apart.
But for those who love, time is eternity.

*All things have their time, and all things pass away.
O Lord, I have loved your Life and your World*

III.

“Where prayer has been valid”: from *Four Quartets* again:

If you came this way,
Taking any route, starting from anywhere,
At any time or at any season,

It would always be the same: you would have to put off
Sense and notion. You are not here to verify,
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity
Or carry report. You are here to kneel
Where prayer has been valid. And prayer is more
Than an order of words, the conscious occupation
Of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying.
And what the dead had no speech for, when living.

They can tell you, being dead: the communication of the dead
Is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living.
Here, the intersection of the timeless moment
Is England and nowhere. Never and always.

4. Looking into the Future.

“The Church cannot prepare for the new millennium in any other way than in the Holy Spirit. What was accomplished by the power of the Holy Spirit in the fullness of time can only through the Spirit’s power now emerge from the memory of the Church. The Spirit in fact makes present in the Church of every time and place the unique revelation brought by Christ to Humanity, making it alive and active in the soul of each individual: “The Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you (*John* 14:26).

In our own day too, the Spirit is the principal agent of the new evangelization... the One who builds the kingdom of God within the course of history and prepares its full manifestation in Jesus Christ, stirring people’s hearts and quickening in our world the seeds of the true salvation which will come at the end of time... The attitude of hope encourages the Christian not to lose sight of the final goal which gives meaning and value to life and offers solid and profound reasons for a daily commitment to transform reality in order to make it correspond to God’s plan “ (*John Paul II, TMA, n. 44-45-46*).

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