

THE FORMATION MINISTRY



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THE FORMATION MINISTRY

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FOREWORD

This is a collection of practical works composed in the course of the exercise of my Formation Ministry. Some are more original and developed like: “Formation in the Bible” and “Paths to Contemplation”, the others are more sketchy and provisional, but all can give some suggestions to people who are involved in the same ministry and have the curiosity and patience to have access to them.

The Formation Ministry requires from the agents of Formation the desire to undergo the same exercises that they submit their pupils to, because the formation task is a life-long commitment. In this sense, to be assigned to the Formation Ministry is a bonus that we will never be able to be grateful enough about.

While education focuses mainly on the brain of people, Formation takes charge of the more central focus of our growth life which is the heart. These booklets are meant to equip the agents of formation with some ideas and practical suggestions that can be valuable and useful in the course of their Formation Ministry.

In faith,

Fr. Lorenzo Carraro, MCCJ

Quezon City, December 2021

FORMATION IN THE BIBLE

(Biblical Foundation of the Formation Ministry)

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Fr. Lorenzo Carraro, MCCJ, 2010.

Christian Humanism Charter: “Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things; and the God of peace will be with you” (Philippians 4:8-9).

FORMATION IN THE BIBLE: INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

The title of this short course is:

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE FORMATION MINISTRY

The title suggests that it will be useful, profitable to look into the Bible and see if we can find some principles, indications, guidelines for the Formation Ministry. The intention is well founded, not arbitrary, if we take into account that the whole Bible is nothing else but the written witness of the history of salvation which is the account of God's initiative of love in choosing, calling and sanctifying his chosen people and eventually, through the mission of Jesus, all the peoples of the world, the whole of Humanity. The Formation Ministry, as referred to Formation to Religious Life and Mission or Priestly Life and Ministry, is a small, tiny section of this universal task of God, The Holy Spirit, that is continuously going on in the life of the Church and Humanity.

1.-Formation: a personal and community enterprise

The human being is a social animal. We are born human (we can say: fully human in the sense that at our birth we are not sub-human), but we become fully human i.e. we develop all our potentialities in the effort to reach full personhood.

The process by which we fulfill our fundamental vocation to full personhood is called Formation and takes place in the community.

Karl Rahner has a beautiful definition of Formation in which the communitarian aspect is underlined but especially the personal aspect. It runs like this:

“FORMATION and EDUCATION means the help which a man or a woman finds in the community in order that he/she might discover and develop his/her unique individuality so that he/she may be worthy of existing as a person in front of God for all eternity”.

2. Names

The idea implied in the very terms FORMATION and EDUCATION is that the formators do not make something new, but help something that is already there to take shape and develop. This is contained in the term FORMATION: to form, to shape, to mould, to fashion what is already there.

In the same way, the word EDUCATION (LATIN: EDUCERE) means to make something come out. Sometimes, the formators are called **Animators**: the concept is the same: to animate, to give life and dynamism to something which is already there. The authority of the Superior or Formator, by the meaning of the term, falls on to the same concept: authority, from the Latin term: AUGERE which means: to make grow.

3. In the Bible, we find the term: TO FORM in very interesting contexts:

To form, to fashion, to mold

Genesis 2:7 “Then the Lord God **formed** man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being”.

Isaiah 64:8 “**Yes, o Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay and you are our potter; we are the work of your hand**”.

Jeremiah 18:1-6 “The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: ‘Arise and go down to the potter’s house and there I will let you hear my words’. So I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was working at his wheel. And the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter’s hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to do. Then the word of the Lord came to me: “O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done?’ says the Lord. **Behold, like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand**”.

Abba, Abba Father, you are the potter, we are the clay, the work of your hands. Mold us, mold us and fashion us into the image of Jesus, your Son, of Jesus your Son. Father, may we be one in you, may we be one in you as He is in you and you are in him. Glory, glory and praise to you; glory and praise to you, forever, Amen; forever, Amen. Abba, Abba Father, you are the potter and we are the clay, the work of your hands. Abba!

Isaiah 45:9-13 “Woe to him who strives with his Maker, an earthen vessel with the potter! **Does the clay say to him who fashions it, ‘What are you making?’** or ‘Your work has no handles?’ Woe to him who says to a father, ‘What are you begetting?’ or to a woman, ‘With what are you in travail?’ Thus says the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, and his Maker: ‘Will you question me about my children, or command me concerning the work off my hands? I made the earth and created man upon it; it was my hands that stretched out the heavens, and I commanded all their host. I have aroused him in righteousness, and I will make straight all his ways; he shall build my city and set my exiles free, not for price or reward,’ says the Lord”.

Isaiah 29:15-16 “Woe to those who hide deep from the Lord their counsel, whose deeds are in the dark, and who says, ‘Who sees us? Who knows us?’ You turn things upside down! **Should the potter be regarded as the clay**, that the thing made should say to its maker, ‘He did not make me’; or the thing formed say of him who formed it, ‘He has no understanding’?”.

Romans 9:20-24 “But who are you, a man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to the molder, ‘Why have you made me thus?’ **Has the potter no right over the clay**, to make out of the same lump one vessel for beauty and another for menial use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience the vessels of wrath made for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for the vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory, even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?”.

4. Romans 12:2 “**Do not be conformed** to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect”

Romans 8:28-30 “We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined **to be conformed** to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified”.

1 Peter 1:13-14 “Therefore gird up your minds, be sober, set your hope fully upon the grace that is coming to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do **not be conformed** to the

passions of your former ignorance, but as he who has called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct, since it is written: You shall be holy for I am holy”.

5. Galatians 4:19-20 “My children I am going through the pains of giving birth to you all over again, **until Christ is formed in you** and how I wish I could be there with you in this moment and find the right way of talking to you. I am quite at loss with you”.

Very interesting Saint Augustine’s commentary on the above quotation from Galatians:

“He calls them “My little children” so that they would imitate him as they would a parent. “With whom I am again in travail” he adds, “until Christ be formed in you!” In saying this, **he seems to be speaking more in the person of the Church their mother**, for in another place he says, “I was a babe among you, like a nurse taking care of her children”.

Now Christ is formed in a believer through faith implanted in his immortal soul. Such a one, gentle and lowly of heart, is summoned to the freedom of grace, and he doesn’t boast of the merit of works which are of no value. But from the grace itself there is a beginning of merit, so that Christ who said, “As you did it to one of the least of my brethren you did it to me” can call him the least bit of himself. **Christ, then, is formed in him who accept his form**; and he receive the form of Christ who cleaves to Christ with spiritual love.

The result is that through this imitating he becomes, in the measure permitted to him, the same as Christ whom he imitates. “He who says he abides in him, - says John – ought to walk in the same way as he walked”. But since **human beings are conceived by their mothers in order to be formed and once they are formed are brought to birth through the pangs of labor, we can ask what is meant by the words, “with whom I am again in travail until Christ is formed in you!”**.

We can take “travail” to mean the anxious care with which he was in labor so that they might be born in Christ; and now again he is in travail because of the danger he sees them in being led astray. The anxiety of such concern about them, which leads him to say that he is in some way in travail can endure “to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that they may no longer be carried about with every wind of doctrine”.

Hence, it is not in reference to the beginning of faith by which they were born, but concerning **the strengthening and perfecting of faith** that he says, “with whom I am again in travail until Christ is formed in you”. Elsewhere he commends this sort of travail in other words when he says, “There is the daily pressure on me of anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall and I am not indignant?”. (St. Augustine)

6. Mutuality in Formation. Formation is a relational process: it calls for Openness, communication and sincerity. Recently, the mutuality of the formation process has become more conscious and central. After God, it is the candidate who is most responsible for his or her formation.

‘A great temptation for people new to formation work is to be overly responsible for those in their care’. Good formation rests on the acknowledgement that we all are in formation, initial or ongoing, and that the Spirit of God is forming and reforming us and will continue to do so. There is no need for the director of formation to worry if the candidate is not all the time happy and satisfied.

PERSONHOOD IN GOD AND IN THE HUMAN BEINGS

Our basic vocation is inscribed in our human nature as seen in the light of Jesus Christ, the perfect human being. The greatest element in us is the fact that **we are persons**, principles of free acts and free choices. God has made us such in order that we pursue what is good.

We are persons since our beginning, but we become persons developing the potentialities that God has put in us. So, we can speak of a process by which we implement the fact of being persons, developing our potentialities in the light of God's plan for each one of us. This is the Formation Process.

We can understand the human person fully only in the light of Revelation:

- **Our beginning is from God:** we are persons because he created us according to his image, as capable of knowing and choosing, intelligent and free.
- **Our end is in God:** we have to become persons in order to speak with God, the personal God of Revelation. Jesus Christ is the perfect Man, the perfect human being, because he is the man who, more than any other, is linked with God. Life in its fullness is, in this perspective, a personal dialogue with a personal God, and its horizon is beyond death: eternal Life: "For this is eternal life, that they may know you, o God, and the one you have sent, Jesus Christ" (John 17:3).

This knowledge is the biblical knowledge, it is a spousal knowledge that embraces not only theoretical knowledge, but emotional involvement and total communication: **it is love**. In this perspective, Mary becomes the icon of vocation and personhood, and therefore of Formation, as we are going to see presently.

The Personhood in God

1. The contribution of the O.T. to our concept of God is immense. In this sense we belong to the Jewish religious tradition. The first idea is that **God is one: monotheism**. The second is that **God is good**. We see this through the goodness of his Creatures. We see this through God's law: **morality**. Then the **God of the Bible is a personal God** who wants to communicate with his creatures, with humanity and cares for us. God's personality and concern for us is witnessed throughout the whole Bible. He is a God who wants to have a covenant with his chosen people, gives them his Law (the content of the covenant) and the heart of God's covenant is love.
 - Deuteronomy 6:4-9
Outside Deuteronomy there is not explicit command to love God but its equivalent is found in 2 Kings 23:25 and Hosea 6:6. Though the command doesn't appear the Psalms and the Prophetic Books are full of the love of God. Jesus, quoting Deuteronomy 6:4-5, lays it down as the greatest commandment of all (Matthew 22:37 (and parallel passages); with it goes fear the fear proper of an heir, not a slave : "There is no fear in love, but perfect love cast out fear" (1 John 4:18).
 - Exodus 3:1-15
 - Genesis 12:1-5

The goodness of the personal God is at the origin of the most popular book of the O.T., **the Psalter**. The Book of Psalms is the most amazing collection of 150 prayers, hymns and songs that can be found in any other religious tradition. In the psalms, the understanding of the personal God as a loving father as well as the personality of the human beings and their relationship with the personal God are abundantly exemplified. The Psalter is still the main source of the official prayer of the Church.

- Psalm 23
- Psalm 103.

All the same, **God is a great mystery**: we cannot see God's face, only his back: Exodus 33:18-33

2. **In the N.T., Jesus reveals the mystery of God**: God is "a family of love", the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

- John 1:18
- 1 John 4:12

GOD "*ad intra*": 1 John 4:16-17

GOD "*ad extra*": John 3:16

Our Lord Jesus Christ is the revelation and the sacrament of God's love for us:

John 1:1-18

John 14:1-11

John 15:1-1-11

- The Trinitarian **commission**: Matthew 28:18-20
- The Trinitarian **prayer**: The sign of the cross
- The Trinitarian **greeting**: 2 Corinthians 13:13

3. **Baptism attaches a person to Jesus, the Savior**. All his work of salvation proceeds from the Father's love and reaches its completion in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

- Romans 6:3-11
- Romans 8:12-17

The mystery of Formation. When everything is said and done, one even for the most well prepared and skilled director of formation, his work remains a mystery in the best and most profound sense of the word. Working with human beings, one touches daily what is imponderable and ineffable in the human personality in its efforts to respond to the challenges of life and to God's plan.

Mystery is at the heart of the Christian event not so much in the sense that we do not have a clear-cut understanding of God's self-revealing and self-giving activity in the world and in our individual histories, but in the sense that we approach a reality which transcends us, an Infinite Goodness that can be only embraced and experienced in the leap of faith and in the surrender of trust.

At the best, the director of formation understands that he can only be a facilitator in the work which he recognizes ever more as the work of the Spirit. Experience teaches him that often the results of his efforts escape his expectations: sometimes those who appeared to be the best formed candidates fail the test of life whereas others who seemed to struggle with the demands of their training and to be

wanting in many things, turn out with balanced personalities and go through life and ministry with success.

In the work of formation, more than in many others, an attitude of peaceful humility, a relaxed sense of perspective, an open mind, almost an *esprit de finesse* are the constitutives of wisdom and make the more fascinating a job which holds in itself the joys and pains of spiritual parenthood which, as St. Paul writes, “takes its name ultimately only from God, the Father”.

Personhood in the human beings

1. The concept of personhood for the human beings is among the most important biblical heritage of humanity. It starts immediately from the account of creation and it develops throughout the Bible, giving way to an articulated and rich existential description of the glory, beauty, drama, torment and ecstasy of being human.

Genesis 1:26-27 “Then God said: ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea...So God created man in his own image, in image of God he created him; male and female he created them...’”.

Genesis 2:7 “Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being”.

Nephesh: is the life-giving breath (Psalm 104:27-35)

Adam: means “soil”

The description of chapter 2 appears more ancient and refers primarily to **the existential sense of fragility of humanity**, which is accentuated after the fall (cf. Genesis 3:19 “In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; **you are dust and to dust you shall return**”). The quotation from first chapter shows a more developed theology and anthropology. The two elements must be taken into account at the same time: the dignity and the drama of being human.

Psalm 8 The majesty of God and the dignity of man

Psalm 90 The human condition

“You sweep men away, they are like a dream, like grass which is renewed in the morning: in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers” (5-6)

Ps 103:15...129:6...Isaiah 40:6-8...1 Peter 1:22-25

2. **The wisdom books** deal with man as a man, human beings as human beings, and we have the classic passages that describe the **human condition** and situation: they have a universal value for humanity:

Job 3 “After this Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth. And Job said: ‘Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night which said, A man-child is conceived...Why is light given to him that is in misery, and life to the bitter in soul, who longs for death, but it comes not, and dig for it more than for hidden treasures; who rejoice exceedingly and are glad when they find the grave?’”.

Jeremiah 20:14-18: “Cursed be the day in which I was born... Why did I come from the womb to see toil and sorrow and spend my days in shame?”

Universal human traits in the Psalms:

- Psalm 1 *The two ways*
- Psalm 51 *MISERERE : the sense of guilt*
- Psalm 73 *Good and bad people compared*
- Psalm 88 *Darkness*
- Psalm 130 *DE PROFUNDIS: prayer in extreme need*

Qoheleth 12:1-8 “Remember your Creator on the days of your youth, before evil days come and the years approach when you say, ‘These give me no pleasure’, before un and light and moon and stars grow dark...*There follows a wonderful description of the aging process and of death, full of poetic images, before the conclusion: Vanity of vanities, Qoheleth says. All is vanity*”.

3. **Man’s freedom** is an essential quality in order to enter in dialogue with the personal God and keep his covenant. The passage that enhances our freedom is:

Deuteronomy 30:15-20 “See, **I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil.** If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you this day, by loving the Lord your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his ordinances, then you shall live and multiply, and the lord your God will bless you in the land which you are entering to take possession of it. But if your hearts turns away.....therefore, **choose life** that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice and cleaving to him...”.

4. In the N. T., we have this dramatic passage about the **struggle between the flesh and the spirit**, the law of freedom which is fulfilled in love:

Romans 7:13-25 “...I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. So then it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but **the evil I do not want is what I do.** Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer that do it, but sin that dwells within me. **Wretched man that I am!** Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I of myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh, I serve the Law of sin”.

Formation to human maturity. In this journey, in which the person in-formation is the protagonist, there is a necessary target which is, at the same time, an essential and indispensable requirement; something that must be there and has to grow: human maturity as the basis for spiritual maturity.

This is the central thrust of our discourse, this is something which can be considered now acquired, almost taken for granted. There is need for self-acceptance in order to assume a radically new identity. It is a losing of life, in order to gain, but we can’t lose what we don’t already possess. We can only be before God the way we truly are, with all that implies in the way of giftedness, sexuality, potential and weakness.

FORMATION STAGES

An other important element in formation is **Finality**: an Ideal is needed as the target of the journey of Formation. We have the ideal in front of us, very concrete: Jesus Christ, the Perfect Man (Human Being).

The stages of Formation follow our fundamental vocation to become fully human, according to the image of Christ, the Perfect Man (Human Being). We can say that **these stages are parallel to the stages in the History of Salvation**:

1. The first Stage is **THE RELIGIOUS DIMENSION**: i.e. to perceive the presence of God in all things: a COSMIC RELIGIOSITY that we find very much in our traditional religious heritage (Traditional Religions) and in the first part of the history of God's Revelation to Abraham and the Patriarchs.

The name of God is still a very common, general name: EL, ELOIM; it has not yet become a personal God, the personal name of God belongs to the Sinaitic revelation: YAHWEH.

Life is seen as a constant relationship with God. It is important not to lose this fundamental and basic dimension even when going up to the following stages. This religiosity can save us, and to appreciate it helps us to be near to the mentality of the people and even to understand the non-Christian religious.

Deuteronomy 6:4-13 “...*After the commandment to love God(Shema, Israel) ...Then take heed lest you forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall fear the Lord your God; you shall serve him and swear by his name*”.

Deuteronomy 10:12-22 “And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul...Behold, to the Lord your God belongs heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it; yet the Lord set his heart in love upon your Fathers and chose their descendants after them, you above all peoples, as at this day...”.

Psalms 104 *The canticle of creatures...*”These all look to you to give them their food in good season. When you give to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are filled with good things. When you hide your face, they are dismayed; when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your Spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the earth”.

Psalms 128 *The blessing of the man who fears the Lord*

Isaiah 43:1-7 “...Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called by name, you are mine....Because you are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you...”.

2. **DIMENSION OF THE LAW**: at a certain moment, the content of God's Covenant and relationship with humanity is specified by means of the Law. God sets in front of us a series of rules: **THE TEN COMMANDMENTS**.

We are no longer free in front of the Law: it represents the demands of order and life. They are not arbitrary or without reason but they are demands flowing from a deeper understanding of God, as a personal God (YAHWEH) and of the dignity of the human person as created according to God's image (personhood).

We have here a link between RELIGION and MORALITY; or between MONOTHEISM and ETHICS. It means that God is not indifferent about the way we treat our fellow human beings and the best way for us of honoring God is to be honest and good to our fellow human beings.

This explains the link between the commandments concerning directly God (the first 3) and those concerning the other human beings (the other 7). If one does not struggle to live a holy life, according to the commandments, he fails to reach the full humanity that God has put as the target of every individual's vocation. In this sense the Law becomes: "a pedagogue to Christ", according to St. Paul's expression.

Exodus 20:1-21 *The Ten Commandments*

Deuteronomy 5:1-22 *The Ten Commandments* "...These words the Lord spoke to all your assembly at the mountain out of the midst of the fire, the cloud, and the thick darkness, with a loud voice; and he added no more. And he wrote them upon two tablets of stone, and he gave them to me".

Psalms 119 *An alphabetical psalm, the longest, a meditation on the Law*. "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. I have sworn an oath and confirmed it, to observe your righteous ordinances (105-106)...".

3. THE DIMENSION OF FAITH IN FREEDOM: THE DIMENSION OF LOVE: God's initiative of love and his self-giving to the human person reaches its climax or peak in Jesus Christ: in him God gives himself to Humanity in an extraordinary and unthinkable way and the human beings accept this proposal through a free and perfect OBEDIENCE: Christ's obedience first and then our obedience.

To reach the dimension of love, we must go beyond ourselves, towards the other: God and people, like Jesus did. He teaches us how to live and how to love. "I do not call you servants any longer, but I call you friends (John 15:15).

In a sense, the Law is no longer exterior to us, but through our obedience of faith, becomes interior to us: a life of love and imitation of Christ, the new Law and the Perfect Man.

This is not the result of a long process of training (although the training is there and the process or journey of Formation is there), but it is A NEW BIRTH: we are born anew through faith and Baptism to enter into the *Sequela Christi*: HE is our ideal of Maturity (Christian and Human): to be a perfect Human Being like Jesus Christ in order to make of our life a dialogue with God as Jesus did.

"The glory of God is a human being fully alive and the fullness of life for human beings is the vision of God" (St. Irenaeus).

Deuteronomy 8:1-6 "...And you shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart...that he might make you know that man doesn't live on bread alone, but that man live by

JESUS CHRIST MODEL AND MASTER OF FORMATION

JESUS MODEL OF FORMATION

In the N. T., **Jesus is everything**. He is the Master and the disciples are called to his “*sequela*”. He is the model and more than the model.

1. He is “the way, the truth and the Life”. He is the “bread of life”. He is the “good shepherd”. He is “the vine and the disciples are the branches”. The disciples do **not simply follow him**, but must be united with him, they are invited to “make their home in him “. They are called to **identify with him** to the point of becoming an “**additional humanity**” offered to Jesus so that he can continue through their lives the mystery of his Incarnation. Jesus expects a childlike humility and availability. The climax of this identification is **to be with Jesus on the cross. It is love, given and received**. St. Paul’s witness is exemplary in this regard.

Luke 9:23-27 “And Jesus said to all: ‘If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For **whoever would save his life would lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it**. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man will be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of his Father and of the holy angels”.

Matthew 18:1-4 “At that time, the disciple came to Jesus saying, ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’ and calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them, and said, ‘Truly I say to you, **unless you change and become like little children**, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven”.

Galatians 2:20 “I have been crucified with Christ; **it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me**; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me”.

2. **Jesus is the perfect Human Being** and to identify with him, not only by imitating his actions but by appropriating his sentiments and feeling (“*Sentire cum Jesu*”) is the work of a lifetime of formation, as saint Paul puts it in unforgettable passages: “**the knowledge of the Son of God**”, “**mature manhood**”, “**the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ**”, “**The surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord**”.

Philippians 3:7-16 “But whatever gain I had, I count as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed I count everything as loss because of the **surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord**. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him...; that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death...”

Ephesians 4:1-16 “I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all. But **grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift**... And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for **building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of**

the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles. Rather, speaking the truth in love, **we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ**, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and builds itself up in love”.

John 15:1-17 “...Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. **He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit**, for apart from me, you can do nothing...”.

3. **Result of a good formation:** We can find in the N.T. the examples of **a formation well accomplished** in the personality of the Apostles, their single mindedness in facing the challenges of their mission, especially in their strong, unwavering conviction of God’s call. This is especially well documented in Saint Paul:

Romans 1:16-17 “For **I am not ashamed of the Gospel**: it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith...”.

1 Timothy 2:1-8a “First of all, then, I urge that supplication, prayers, intercessions and thanksgiving be made for all people...God, our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth...For this **I was appointed a preacher and apostle** (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth...”.

2 Timothy 1:1-14 “...I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for **God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power and love and self-control**...For this Gospel I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher, and therefore I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed because **I know whom I have believed**, and I am sure he is able to guard until that day what has been entrusted to me. Follow the pattern of the sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus; guard the truth that has been entrusted to you by the Holy Spirit who dwells within us”.

Ephesians 3:14-21 “...he may grant you to be strengthened with might through the Spirit in the inner man, and that **Christ may dwell in your heart through faith**; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God...”.

The Aim of Formation: Sharing Jesus’ Mission

The excessive enthusiasm for psychology and the obsessive pursuit of human wholeness has been described as the ‘therapeutic model’. **Human maturity can really become an obsession and produce the opposite effect**. People can become enmeshed in a relentless search for an elusive ideal of true self which is nothing more than an illusion and hides the incapacity of accepting themselves for what they are.

The danger of self-absorption is certainly very real and more than theoretical. I think that the present emergence of mission as the aim of formation is very healthy and psychologically correct. Human maturity is best served if achieved indirectly in the process of being caught up and enthused by real ideals which are outside the individual, like serving the poor or preaching the gospel. **This might**

be seen as similar to falling in love with a real person. This real person is Jesus whose Gospel we are commissioned to spread.

The challenge is to see the attractive aspects of the present context of mission. In the past, thousands were ready to give their life for the ideal: ‘to cross the seas, to save one soul and to die’. We have to inject the same dynamic charge into the modern aspects of mission such as dialogue, service of the poor, peace and justice and bringing the Gospel into people’s cultures.

And if the frontline of mission cuts now across the secularized, consumerist western world, as some theologians of mission say, then it will be the ideal of **resistance, the counter-cultural challenge to the all-pervasive money culture of our society**, a resistance that we can have in common with the believers of other religions, especially the monotheistic religions. It is within a formation which confronts the young with the real problems and ideals of the present church and world that the pursuit of human maturity will acquire its beneficial effects and cease to run the risk of becoming a therapy of navel-gazing or self-gratification.

JESUS MASTER OF FORMATION

Since the beginning of his public life, Jesus chose his disciples, especially the Twelve, and **started the process of their formation** both by instructing them and by making them share the vicissitudes of his apostolic life. The pattern of vocation in the Biblical tradition applies also to the vocation of Jesus’ disciples.

1. **Vocation’s patterns in the Bible:** The vocation manifests itself first with a strong, **deep experience of God**; then the vocation proper follows. Generally, the reaction of the one who is called is one of **fear and a sense of unworthiness**. Then come God’s re-assurance and promise: “I will be with you!” that **confirm the vocation**.

Isaiah 6:1-8 /Jeremiah 1:1-10 /Luke 1:26-38

Luke 5:1-11 “... ‘Depart from me , for **I am a sinful man**, Lord’... and Jesus said to Simon, ‘Do not be afraid; henceforth you will be a fisher of men’. And when they had brought their boats to land,, they left everything and followed him”.

Romans 8:28-30 “We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren. **And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.**

2. The first way that Jesus adopted in order to form his disciples was to **“stay with him” and live together**. He reserves the most attentive care to the instruction of his disciples and takes advantage of every little incident in order to instruct the disciples. Especially, **he wants them to understand his true identity**: “Whom do you think I am?”. **He is patient with their slow pace** of following and understanding. He wants them **to grow in self-knowledge and in self-acceptance**. All the same he tells them the demands of their vocation and mission; many times the disciples witness the fact that **only after Jesus’ resurrection**, with the help of the Holy Spirit, they came to understand the fullness of his teaching.

John 1:35-39 "...Teacher, where are you staying?" He said to them, '**Come and see.**' They came and saw where he was staying; and **they stayed with him** that day..."

Revelation 3:14-20 "...Those whom I love, I reprove and chasten: so be zealous and repent. Behold: I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, **I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me**".

Matthew 16:13-20 "...Simon Peter replied, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.'..."

Mark 10:35-45 "...But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For **the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve** and to give his life as a ransom for many".

Matthew 16:5-12 "...But Jesus, aware of this, said, 'O man of little faith, why do you discuss among yourselves...Do you not yet perceive? Do you not remember...".

3. Very remarkable are the passages in which we see **Jesus' frustration** in front of the refusal of his teaching and rejection of his formation work and his person and mission. Jesus shows us that he accepted the **vulnerability of loving**, the risk of investing energies in a work that depends also to a great extent on the free correspondence of the person.

Luke 19:41-44 "And when he draw near and saw the city **he wept over it**, saying, 'Would that even today you knew that things that make for peace! But now they are hid from your eyes!...because you did not know the time of your visitation" (Cf. Matthew 23:37-39, Luke 13:34-35).

4. The **climax of their formation journey** was their sharing Jesus' Paschal Mystery. The Paschal Mystery becomes clear and vital to them only after their **Paschal experience** or the experience of the Risen Lord. Before the passion, Jesus points at himself in a special way as their model:

John 12:23-33 "...The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. **If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there shall my servant be also;** if anyone serves me, my Father will honor him..."

John 13:1-17 "...Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Master and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do what I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, **a servant is not greater than his master;** nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you put them into practice".

5. The **paschal experience** of the apostles is marked by a "**quality leap**" that the Risen Jesus provokes in them by his apparitions. The apparitions are unexpected, they come from Jesus' initiative, they bring great joy to the apostles. They are meant to show that Jesus is truly risen and **to complete the Apostles' experience of Jesus and his mystery**. As a consequence, they provoke in the disciples a "quality leap". **The best example is in the episode of Thomas** (from human certainty to faith). But also Mary Magdalene (from simple human love to supernatural love), the disciples of Emmaus (the acceptance of the full Gospel), Peter (from self assurance to humility).

John 20:19-29/ 20:11-18/ 21:15-19/ Luke 24:13-32

THE METHOD OF JESUS, THE FORMATOR

I would like to stress **the categories of Jesus' pedagogy** i.e. the centrality of the person, the pattern of the personal encounter one by one, the dialogue as way to the truth, the fundamental role of Jesus' question to the person and of the person to Jesus ("Whom do you think I am ?", Mark 4:41; 8:29), by which **the identity of the person, that is the hub of any formation**, passes through the acknowledgement of the value of the individual and his freedom of decision.

Lastly, but it is something to take into account since the beginning, Jesus' pedagogy is marked by love. **Some biblical scholars define it as "hospitality": i.e. an absolute availability towards people** that can be considered as Jesus' style and specific trait of his formation approach. It is the attitude of a master who wants and is ready to learn from the others because to "learn" is, as it were, at the heart of the Christian Mystery (*Fides ex auditu*: faith comes from hearing/listening).

The true Master operates in a way that the pupil, by encountering him, may learn -as from a living mirror- his own identity which, up to that moment, was shallow and obscure. **Jesus creates a space of freedom around his person**, sharing, by his mere presence, a beneficial proximity/closeness with all those who approach him. **This is a living space** in which to progressively grasp the depth, the breath and the height... and **which allows them to discover their truest identity and to own it**, starting from what is most profound in it that will suddenly become an act of "faith": **credit given to the One who stands in front of us** and at the same time to the fullness of life.

We can see Jesus' parables and his table fellowship as means for the above mentioned **constructive and liberating hospitality**. It is the way Jesus fulfills his holiness i.e. his love relationship which shows itself in as much as Jesus doesn't impose his identity as Master, absolute witness of the complete truth, but, as it is said in the Christological Hymn in the Letter to the Philippians, "he emptied himself", foregoing, as it were, his figure as Master and learns instead from those he goes to meet, helping them to listen and to understand their own identity, thanks to Jesus' words of truth.

Jesus helps them to accept, **through their free and motivated humanity**, salvation not as imposition or coercion in order to avoid punishment, but as Good News.

Formation, culture, communication.

The dynamics of formation nowadays are often compounded with the problem of acculturation and inculturation. Candidates are often called to enter into the process of assuming the values of a host culture while enriching the community with the riches of their culture of origin. This process is by no means confined to our religious or missionary communities. It is happening to an increasing extent in the wider world especially in the urban setting.

In this encounter which is by and large forced on the Church by the changing circumstances, something is gained and something is lost. The same balance is struck that happened when the opening to the world brought us to face the insights of the modern human sciences like sociology and psychology: a condition of naivety was lost forever but, at the same time, the wealth of human

MARY AND FORMATION

Introduction

Every activity of the Christians, the followers of Jesus, falls under the influence of Mama Mary. First of all, because Mary is the ICON of the Church i.e. what happened to her, her destiny, is the destiny of every disciple, follower of Jesus.

But also because **we have been entrusted to Mary by Jesus**, as we read in the Gospel of John 19:25-27: “This is your son”. In the person of the beloved disciple, Jesus entrusts all of us to Mama Mary. The fact that Christ/God has entrusted (AFFIDAMENTO/COMMITMENT) the beloved disciple to Mary, corresponds on the side of the disciple to the acceptance of Mary in her function as spiritual mother: it means openness, acceptance, personal link or tie, active love; it corresponds to the opening of faith, it is in the line of faith, it is a fruit of faith as trust. We entrust ourselves to Mary (facciamo affidamento su Maria, nostra madre). We entrust ourselves to Mary especially in connection with our Formation Journey. She is our spiritual mother, the Mother of the Church.

MARY ICON OF FORMATION

We can contemplate the most outstanding example of Formation in Mama Mary: she is our ICON OF FORMATION. We can read anew the gospel references concerning Mary and interpret them as aspects of the journey of Formation. It is amazing to see how her life can become a real model for the most important traits of genuine Formation.

It is very rewarding for Formators and Formandees alike to know that Mama Mary embodied in herself the joy and torment of the Formation Process and in this way she can become **the star of Formation** as well as the icon.

It is very comforting to know that this difficult and demanding task is lived under the protection, intercession and smile of our spiritual mother, the MOTHER OF THE CHURCH.

I have reflected on five (5) aspects of Formation that are highlighted in the life of Mama Mary, but the first two are most important and fundamental: Formation is Affirmation; Formation is Joy. The other aspects are: Formation is Discernment, Formation is Obedience, Formation is Imitation.

FORMATION IS AFFIRMATION

This is the **core of the present reflection** and it flows from the exegesis of the passage of the gospel of Luke concerning the episode of the Annunciation (Luke 1:26-38).

“In the sixth months (of Elizabeth’s pregnancy), the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth. He was sent to a young virgin who was betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the family of David, and the virgin’s name was Mary.

The angel came to her and said: “Rejoice, full of grace, the Lord is with you.” Mary was trouble at these words, wondering what this greeting could mean. But the angel said, “Do not fear, Mary, for God has looked kindly on you. You shall conceive and bear a son and shall call him Jesus. He will be great and shall rightly be called son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the kingdom of David, his ancestor; he will rule over the people of Jacob for ever and his reign shall have no end.”

Then Mary said to the angel, “How can this be if I am a virgin?” And the said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore, the holy child to be born shall be called Son of God. Even your relative Elizabeth is expecting a son in her old age, although she was unable to have a child, and she is now in her sixth month. With God nothing is impossible.”

Then Mary said, “I am the handmaid of the Lord, let it be done to me as you have said”. And the angel left her.”

The Annunciation represents **Mary’s Trinitarian Experience and at the same time her call to full personhood.**

The Bible includes God and Man and their Dialogue that ends in a Love-Pact: the Covenant (MISSION DEI: God’s proposal and Man’s response/ God’s Revelation and Man’s Reception).

In the New Testament, Monotheism blossoms into the TRINITARIAN MYSTERY and Salvation History overflows to include the whole of humanity (before it included only the Jews: the Chosen People; then all peoples are chosen) and the whole existence of Man. This is the novelty and exceeding nature of the Trinitarian Mystery (Eccedenza d’Amore).

Christ’s history/event/vicissitude is understandable only in the light of his relationship with the Father and the Spirit. The same can be said of every follower of Christ, every individual Christian.

Christian Life (and its expression: Christian Spirituality) has been described or defined as:

The ongoing and unifying coincidence/correspondence/co-extension of the Human Spirit with the Spirit of God so that we may live in the Church as disciples of Jesus and children of the Father.

To be Christian means to enter into a mature and liberating relationship with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit/ with the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit. In this way, we will be ALIVE IN THE SPIRIT who is the gift of the Father to the Son (and of the Risen Christ to the Church).

The fundamental Option of every Christian is the free acceptance of God’s plan of Salvation, the plan of the Trinity, to enter into the Trinitarian Experience. “NOS CREDIDIMUS CHARITATI”: this is how the first Christians defined themselves: We are the ones who have believed in the love of God.

Mary is the Model / Icon and the Mother of our Trinitarian Experience through her own Trinitarian Experience that is most evident in the Luke’s account of the mystery of the Annunciation.

Mary is the first person in history who relates to the Triune God: mother of the Son, beloved daughter of the Father and disciple or spouse of the Spirit. She gives a joyous response to the Father, she believes in the Son as Messiah, and she welcomes the Spirit as life-giving power.

It is in the Trinitarian Experience, as revealed in the episode of the Annunciation, that God forms Mary's personality and makes her a person in the full sense of the word. God calls Mary to personhood. The experience is

Manifested in the give and take of a mature love relationship that develops in freedom and understanding.

The first movement is ACCEPTANCE: Mary is called to acknowledge the infinite love of God the Father for her that makes her his privileged daughter. At the angel's greeting, Mary is troubled, she is upset... The enormity of the assertion "GRATIA PLENA, DOMINUS TECUM" is almost unbelievable... Mary is embarrassed at the incredible greeting... She takes some time in order to come to terms with the fact that she is the recipient of the infinite, gratuitous love of God (GRACE). In her the predestination of humanity to sharing God's life and entering into the intimacy of God's Trinitarian life is finding its destination.

Her VIRGINITY is the sense and the symbol of her total inadequacy to the infinite gift of God, radical existential poverty, but also complete availability/total freedom to accept, to surrender.

In the event of the Annunciation, the initiative is of the Father; the Son is present because it is for him that the divine deed is accomplished, and the Holy Spirit acts for the conception of the Son. In Mary we have the first revelation of the Trinity and the actions of the Three Person.

The person of Mary is formed and affirmed in very moment that she is called forth to acknowledge the infinite love of the Father for humanity and for her in particular and to give way to the Incarnation of the Son by surrendering herself to the action of the Holy Spirit. And this affirmation is substantially the acceptance of the free love of God. Doing this, Mary is repeating in her own destiny Christ's own AFFIRMATION as we read in 2 Cor 1:18-22.

"God knows that our dealing with you is not Yes and No, just as the Son of God, Jesus Christ whom we, Silvanus, Timothy and I, preach to you, was not Yes and No; with him it was simply Yes. In him all the promises of God have come to be a Yes, and we also say in his name: Amen! Giving thanks to God. God himself has anointed us and strengthens us with you to serve Christ; he has marked us with his own seal in a first outpouring of the Spirit in our heart".

The best fruit of this acceptance of the love of God as affirmation of our personality is the Obedience of Faith. Personhood means responsibility: God's love calls us to become collaborators of God's plan of Salvation by sharing the burden of God's mission by means of our obedience.

FORMATION IS JOY

Mary's reaction to God's initiative reveals and forms her as a person, sensitive, sensible, active and responsible i.e. capable of a deep experience of faith. If, at the outset, she was hesitant and troubled, embarrassed and almost incapable to believe the enormity of what she was going through, later on Mary comes to terms with reality, the reality of God and her own reality and her person/personality is flooded with joy.

We have the witness of this in the episode of the visitation and especially the uttering of the MAGNIFICAT: Luke 1:39-56.

“Mary then set out for a town in the hills of Judah. She entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leapt in her womb. Elizabeth was filled with Holy Spirit and giving a loud cry, said, “You are most blessed among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb! How is it that the mother of my Lord comes to me? The moment your greeting sounded in my ears, the baby within me suddenly leapt for joy. Blessed are you who believed that the Lord’s word would come true!” And Mary said: “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit exults in God my savior! He has looked upon his servant in her lowliness, and people forever will call me blessed. The Mighty One has done great things for me, Holy is his Name! From age to age his mercy extends to those who live in his presence. He has acted with power and done wonders, and scattered the proud with their plans. He has put down the mighty from their thrones and lifted up those who are downtrodden. He has filled the hungry with good things but he has sent the rich away empty. He held out his hand to Israel, his servant, for he remembered his mercy, even has he promised our fathers, Abraham and his descendants forever.” Mary remained with Elizabeth about three months and then returned home.

The **Magnificat** is the resonance in Mary’s heart of her Trinitarian experience. Mary is full of joy because she feels herself touched by the saving love of God. Already she has accepted without any problem Elizabeth’s greetings and blessing; now, in the canticle, she see the future and accepts the blessings of all generations. She is so rooted in her humility/virginity that she is totally free to accept and cherish the unbelievable, infinite love of God. Now it is Joy, existential, supernatural

Joy! The experience of joy in accepting God’s love and loving will in our lives is a fundamental step in our Formation. Mary is for us a model of this stage of Formation, she is “CAUSA NOSTRAE LAETITIAE”: the cause of our joy. I always cherished the sentence of an experienced missionary: “If your experience of God is not an experience of joy, you have no right to be a missionary”.

3. OTHER ASPECTS OF MARY AND FORMATION

FORMATION IS DISCERNMENT

Twice in the gospel of Luke we find references to Mama Mary’s thoughtfulness:

Luke 2:19:

“As for Mary, she treasured all these messages and continually pondered over them”.

Luke 2:51:

“As for his mother, she kept all these things in her heart”.

Mary is shown going through the happenings of Jesus’ infancy and consequently Jesus’ life with a contemplative attitude and a discerning mind and heart. Discernment is usually considered as an attitude of the mind and the heart in order to reach a right operative choice, as a method of deliberation.

But there is a larger concept of discernment; it is discernment as a way of life. It is the attitude by which we understand the happenings of our past life as history of salvation and we see God inside our present reality. In the light of discernment as a way of life, we want to acquire the mind and the heart of Jesus (SENTIRE CUM JESU), his value system and outlook.

Certainly Mary had acquired the mind of Jesus. She is the model of Formation as discernment. A well-formed personality is a thoughtful personality and a discerning one. We are especially called to overcome narrow-mindedness and keep our life in the perspective of God's plan of salvation which is enfolding in the world. Consecrated people who lack formation to discernment, can fall under a narrow minded outlook that usually manifest itself in:

- *Antagonism*: this happens when we waste our psychic energies in fighting among ourselves, with the members of our community, because of different points of view or simply because of different temperaments. It takes the form of jealousy or envy, competitiveness, gossip and sometimes even calumny.

- *Discouragement/Despondency*: in the face of difficulties or failures in our apostolate; or because of weak health or difficulties in relationships. It turns easily into self-pity.

- *Self-pity*: it is the excessive sense of our limitations, the morbid fixation with the shortcoming of our personality that paralyze the person and brings the person to bend on himself/herself, losing sight of the wider perspective of his/her personality and of the wider view of God's operation in reality.

FORMATION IS OBEDIENCE

John 2:1-11:

“Three days later there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus was also invited to the wedding with his disciples. When all the wine provided for the celebration had been served and they had run out of wine, the mother of Jesus said to him, “They have no wine”. Jesus replied, “Woman, your thoughts are not mine! My hour has not yet come.” However his mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.”

Nearby were six stone water jars meant for the ritual washing as practiced by the Jews; each jar could hold twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants, “Fill the jars with water.” And they filled them to the brim. Then Jesus said, “Now draw some out and take it to the steward.” So they did. The steward tasted the water that had become wine, without knowing from where it had come; for only the servants who had drawn the water knew.

So, he called the bridegroom to tell him: “Everyone serves the best wine first and when people have drunk enough, he serves that which is ordinary. Instead you have kept the best wine until the end.” This miraculous sign was the first, and Jesus performed it at Cana in Galilee. In this way he let his Glory appear and his disciples believed in him”.

The work of Salvation is a mysterious encounter between God's Grace and our Freedom. We are saved radically and totally by his grace, but his grace cannot be received by us without our cooperation, our free assent, the YES of our freedom. By creating us free and by respecting our freedom, God empowers us to work for our salvation and the salvation of others.

The perfect example of this divine/human SYNERGY (POWER+ENERGY; SYN+MUTUAL; INTERACTION) is Mama Mary. Already at the Annunciation, her experience of faith becomes Obedience of Faith. The word: Obedience come from Latin: ob-audire (to listen). Mary's obedience is

SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

&

VOCATION PROMOTION

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Fr. Lorenzo Carraro, MCCJ

Manila, 2012.

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NOTES ON SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

General Introduction:

Spiritual Direction finds its place in the wider horizon of our quest for holiness or the perfection of love: this is our most fundamental vocation and our greatest fulfillment. To achieve that aim we have to consider the means of perfection of which Spiritual Direction is one and a distinguished one.

These are the **means of perfection**:

Interior (belonging to the person):

1. Desire of perfection/holiness
2. To know God and oneself (self-knowledge & knowledge of God)
3. To do the will of God (Conformity to God's will)
4. Prayer

Exterior (coming from outside the person):

1. Spiritual Direction
2. Life Plan/Project (includes the vocational journey and the status in life)
3. Spiritual Reading & Inputs (Retreats, etc.)
4. Sanctification of public relations

Introduction

Spiritual Direction is present in all cultures and religions in different ways and with different names: Elders' advice, Guru, philosopher like Socrates is a classic example.

In the Bible, and especially in Jesus' example, we have the foundations of Spiritual Direction (cf. *Titus a part*).

In the history of Christian Spirituality, Spiritual Direction appears as a normal means of spiritual progress. During the time of Monasticism, the Abbot and Abbess appear as father/mother figures to whom the individual monk/nun will go for spiritual advice. During the time of the Mendicant Orders, The Guardian appears as an elder brother, a brother figure, according to the spirit of Saint Francis of Assisi. Spiritual Direction finds a large foundation and development in the modern times, especially because of Saint Ignatius of Loyola and his "Spiritual Exercises" which is a handbook for Directors of souls in the dynamics of the 30 day Retreat.

Saint Teresa of Avila wrote: "God likes so much that a person subjects himself/herself to the direction of another person that He doesn't want us to give credit/faith to supernatural truth communicated by himself if they do not first pass through the channel of a human mouth".

We alone can easily deceive ourselves. The Latin proverb "*Nemo iudex in domo sua*" (Nobody is judge in his house). We see, for example, that even in secular life, doctors don't usually cure themselves, but, when they are sick, they run to another doctor. Saint Teresa of Avila laments the

absence or scarcity of Spiritual Directors and especially Spiritual Directors who are theologically prepared and knowledgeable.

In the journey of spiritual life,

- If you are a beginner(PURIFICATION), we need help to leave behind a life of sin, to pursue penance and asceticism, to go through periods of aridity and dryness;
- If you are a proficient (ILLUMINATION) and occupied, committed to the practice of human virtues, you need to overcome tiredness and boredom, to persevere in the effort;
- If you are advanced in the way of perfection (UNION), you need to perceive and cultivate the gift of the Spirit and to be attentive to God's inspirations...

THE CONCEPT OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

1. The art of leading souls progressively from the beginning of spiritual life to the heights of Christian perfection (accompaniment).
2. Personal relationship between two people in which one assist the other to grow in spiritual life (Spiritual Fatherhood, *pater pneumatikos*, Friendship, Facilitator...)
3. The Confessor is a judge with power to forgive; the Spiritual Father or Director is an elder, a friend who gives advice.

SPIRITUAL FATHER

1. Mediator between the Holy Spirit (the real, authentic director of the believers) and the subject/person who asks advice, help;
2. One person assisting another person to realize (make real) his/her relationship with God: "a companionship (companioning) on the journey to God so that the relationship with God becomes real in a person's life ("Who is God for me and who am I for Him?").
3. Spiritual Direction is never "direction" in the sense of "ruling/dominating", but can complement companionship with pointing out the way, the direction. Because in Christian life, we do not journey aimlessly, Jesus is the Way. Spiritual Direction has always to do with Jesus, since Jesus is our relationship with God.
4. Spiritual accompaniment: mountain guide who knows the way because he has done it before and can accompany...
5. S.D. is different from Pastoral Care which implies giving more information about our faith, or theological clarification or consolation versus grief or sympathetic/empathetic listening to people's problems...Spiritual Direction is directly concerned with the person's actual experiences in his/her relationship with God, especially in the practice of prayer, what is happening in prayer...

DEFINITION

S. D. is a help given by a Christian to another which enable the person to pay attention to God's personal communication to him /her, to respond to this personally communicating God and to live out the consequences of this relationship.

The heart of Christianity is the experience in faith, hope and love that Jesus is my Savior and the Savior of the world and that I want to respond to him. In other words: that the heart is prayer and a life based on prayer: "Lord, teach me how to pray". This comes from the Ignatian Spirituality, the tradition

of the Spiritual Exercises by which we believe that God acts during our prayer periods and we are guided to understand and become perceptive of God's ways by the retreat master or guide.

The dynamics of the Spiritual Exercises continue somehow the tradition of the "Lectio Divina": a journey towards contemplation or the prayer of the heart which is conversion. The function of the Guide or Spiritual Director is not always strictly necessary, but it is always convenient and useful and sometimes absolutely necessary.

NECESSARY QUALITIES of the person directed:

1. Sincerity
2. Obedience
3. Perseverance (not too many changes, interruptions, but stability, steadiness)
4. Discretion (each person is different, no use in relating to other what goes on in Spiritual Direction, also to keep peace of mind...).

Qualities, attitudes towards the spiritual father:

1. Respect
2. Confidence/trust
3. Supernatural love (excessive attachment and sensual affection is inappropriate and even wholesome friendship can get in the way of being able to correct effectively, although friendship can help and there is a model of S.D. based on friendship).

AREAS OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTION: SPIRITUAL LIFE

The journey of the soul to holiness or the perfection of love. The spiritual formation of the soul: from the Pride Form to the Christ Form.

In purification: in order to overcome sin; in illumination: in order to exercise virtue; in union: in order to recognize and accept the gifts of the Spirit.

These are the main areas: Prayer Life, Discernment, Relationships (Family, community, others: friendship), Vocation, consecrated Life or life of Vows, Union with God/Contemplation, Apostolate.

Areas covered by the Formative Encounter

1. Temperament/self-knowledge/character formation
2. Socialization-community life
3. Vocation history and motivations
4. **Human Maturity:** formation to
 - *Communication (against fear and isolation)*
 - *Acceptance (against prejudices)*
 - *Friendship (against selfishness)*
 - *Responsibility (against superficiality)*
 - *Perseverance (against inconstancy)*

Areas covered by Spiritual Direction

1. Life of Grace: Renunciation and fight against sin/Living the sacraments of Reconciliation and Communion/Practice of the supernatural virtues of faith, hope and charity.
2. Practice of human virtues: Prudence, Justice, Fortitude and temperance
3. “Sentire cum Jesu”: Feelings and self-control
4. The inspiration of the Holy Spirit
5. Life of prayer
- 6. Spiritual Maturity:**

Appreciation of silence and recollection

- *Desire for personal prayer*
- *Personalization of the Word of God*
- *Capacity and willingness of sharing within oneself*
- *Openness with the Spiritual Director*

JESUS IS THE MODEL

The Blessed Humanity of Jesus is the blueprint/model. Christian Spiritual Direction is rooted in Christ, the way, the truth and the life. He is the ultimate source of spiritualization, interiorization and sanctification. The One who from his fullness pours out on us the Holy Spirit, God’s love. This is why the Spiritual Director in Christianity cannot be only the sympathetic listener, but he must also give direction, point the way who is Jesus. Jesus is also the model of Spiritual Director par excellence: ex. Nicodemus, Natanael, Samaritan woman, especially his relationship with Peter...

MODELS OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

1. Pastoral
2. Charismatic: special, extraordinary gift like the one of Saint Pio of Petralcina or the Curate of Ars or St. Ignatius, Francis De Sales, Josemaria Escrivà de Balaguer....A very good thing, but God is also in the ordinary.
3. Friendship: to be attentive that the human aspect doesn’t obliterate or diminish the spiritual...
4. Incarnational: trains to see God in everything. Ignatian, based on the dynamics of consolation/desolation and making use of the consciousness exams. Danger: to belittle or neglect prayer and supernatural aspect...
5. Psychological: look at the feelings, wholistic, but can lead to too many psychological problems...

SPIRITUAL DIRECTION AND RELATIONSHIPS

Our life is a net of relationships: first with God (all the area of prayer); with people: this is an area which tests and fosters our spiritual and human growth and maturity and is embraced by our prayer life.

Relations are bound to come up in the course of Spiritual Direction, charged with emotions when they concern the family;

community life is a source of problems and difficulties if we are monopolized by the difficulty brought about by differences in temperament, tastes, opinions, cultural elements, likings and disliking... The community is a gift and a conquest.

Friendship and human love: looking for help in understanding what is going on when we are emotionally disturbed...The relationship may be an inordinate one with inordinate attachment...exclusive friendship, romantic aspect, surrounded by gossip...

Expressions of affection play an important role in relationships. Prudence is required in expression of affection: inappropriate relationship which has still appropriate expression has a chance of becoming controlled; a good, appropriate relationship with inappropriate expression of affection may become bad/inappropriate.

An ordinate relationship leads to Jesus and his values, to our authentic self, to a sense of peace and comfort, to freedom. It is support, empowerment, fullness of heart, joy.

An inordinate relationship takes us away from Jesus, to the values of the world, to dependence, secrecy, restlessness and dissatisfaction, compromise, sin.

RELATIONSHIP WITH THE FAMILY

Some guidelines because this is an area that brings many problems to young people in formation and to young religious.

“Love is thicker than water”. We must appreciate family ties, keep alive the relationship with the family, be good sons and daughters of our families. We owe much to our families. Even in the field of vocation, most of the times we are supported by our families like Jesus by Mary. Sometimes we are opposed, but if we are strong and keep the links, changes usually happen. Religious vocation is an enrichment for the family and a blessing from God. It should be the religious who draws the family closer to God, not the family who draws the religious away from God.

Religious vocation implies a real sacrifice of family ties, a sacrifice which we should look in the eye and embrace consciously and for good without compromise. On the other hand, it is the law of life as it is reflected also in the Bible: Genesis 1:26-28; 2:23-24 (Cf. Matthew 19:4-5): “A man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife...” Our parents suffer when we leave them for marriage or religious life, but if we succeed, they are happy because it is the law of life.

“The love of God is thicker than blood” : Our new family is the community of the congregation and the people we serve. They have the right of our loyalty. To serve the Church (God & people) is as serious as serving a husband/wife and children. In the Gospels, we have the example of Mama Mary (John 2:1-11 “Do as he will tell you”; John 19:25-27 Mary under the cross of Jesus; Acts 1:14 Mary praying with the first Christian community) and Jesus: Luke 2:41-52 Jesus in the temple; Matthew 12:48 (46-50) “Who is my mother...”; Luke 14:25-35 ...).

In case of extreme emergency, the Superiors will allow to help: in my experience: Sr. Giulia, Sr. Virginia, Fr. Marco Canovi. Quite a few times, the reason of helping the family for those who leave the vocation hides other more personal reason, it is used as an excuse.

RELATIONSHIP WITH THE COMMUNITY

I will not develop here this topic of the community which requires much time and space. Relationship with the community should find a balance in our mature life that allow us to feel at home and enjoy peace of mind:

1. It is God who brings us together, who gave me these brothers: it is a community of faith;
2. We are all different: learn to accept the others as they are. If you want room for yourself, give room to the others: tolerance and forgiveness: “Your only debt is mutual love” (Romans 13:8).
3. “Don’t ask what your community will do for you, ask yourself what you can do for your community” (Country: J. F. Kennedy). See the marvelous passage about mutual love in Romans 12:3-16.
4. “We are the keepers of our brothers’ solitude/privacy”: create an atmosphere of recollection, study, prayer, respect...
5. We should take it for granted that the difficulty of living together: give and take, rubbing elbows, be ready to make up, to give some space and find some space...The need of some privacy...The dynamics of community life should not monopolize our life, taking all our attention, wasting all our energies. Our energies of mind and heart should be for Jesus, our God, in prayer and for the people we serve, for our mission, our apostolate.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS: LOVE AND FRIENDSHIP

Sexuality: our condition as male or female. Our sex. Sexuality is part of our personality, a gift from creation, which will stay with us even beyond death. A blessing and a source of positive energy. Masculinity and Femininity. Cf. Genesis 1,2.

“From the very beginning, humanity is described as articulated in the male-female relationship. Woman is another “I” in a common humanity that therefore appears as the unity of the two. Humanity is a relational reality. An ordered world is born of differences brought together in harmony by relationships.

The capacity to love –reflection of the image of God who is love – is disclosed in the spousal character of the body in which the masculinity and femininity of the person is expressed.

Their equal dignity as persons is realized as physical, psychological and ontological complementarity. Sexuality is a fundamental, integral component of personality. The human dimension of sexuality flows into the theological dimension since Christian life is a nuptial mystery”.

Chastity: the virtue by which we deal with our sexuality according to the different circumstances of our life and condition. It is a human and Christian virtue. Our modern world do not value chastity, but in the Bible we have the beautiful passage of 1Corinthians 6:12-20 “...The body is not meant for immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body...So, glorify God with your body”.

Counteract the prejudice of “consenting adults” and “Pornography” (“A cesspool in your house”).

Love: to see/make the beauty and the goodness of another person. Saint Augustine. “Thinking of me, God creates me, loving me he makes me lovable”.

Stages of love:

1. Attraction: romantic, sentimental, emotional stage (essential, beautiful, necessary but superficial, incomplete...)

2. Commitment: the decision of the will, it implies freedom...
3. The Cross of Jesus: Mo. Teresa: "Love until it hurts" and then "Love until it hurts no more".
4. Time, perseverance, faithfulness.

Friendship and Apostolate: service not domination: cf. Matthew 20:20-28 "... The Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many...". Very beautiful the link between prayer and service in Mo. Teresa: "The fruit of silence is prayer; the fruit of prayer is faith; the fruit of faith is love, the fruit of love is service (which is love in action) and the fruit of service is joy and peace".

Friendship : Love among equals. "Friendship either finds equals or make equals". No jealousy, possessiveness, exclusiveness. "*Les amis de mes amis sont mes amis*".

Friendship and community: Introduce your friends to your community and let the community not suppress the joy of friendship.

RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD AND SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

1. God is the greatest mystery, but the biblical God is a mystery of self-communication.
 - Exodus 3:1-12 The burning bush
 - Isaiah 43:1-7 A love relationship with God
2. PRAYER is love. Cf. Luke 10:38-42; John 12:1-8
 - *Self-disclosure:* show yourself to God
 - *Silence* (comfortable)
 - *Peak experiences*
 - *Listening to God in the Scripture :* AFFIRMATION: Luke 1:26-38 Mary at the Annunciation; John 1:43-51 Nathanael: God cannot love that which is not beautiful and He loves each one of us. God doesn't make junk.
 - *Listening to God in your body*

The Spiritual Director is the third person who helps us in our relationship with God Action proves that there is genuine prayer. "By their fruits you shall know them". God's love becomes love for people.

The dynamics of the love relationship with God are similar to those with people. Attraction is essential for the beginning of a love relationship. We have to become aware of the attraction, right chemistry, magic moments. It is developed by external orientation: spending time together, giving gifts to each other; then internal orientation: memories of encounters, desire of being together; imagination that rest in the other, in God. Love is a decision that must be made over and over again, countless times.

Prayer is love relationship with God through the Blessed Humanity of Jesus (John 1:18 "Nobody has ever seen God; the only Son who is in the bosom of the Father , he has made him known") and is marked by

- *gratuitousness* (no calculation, no profit, but spontaneity) and
- *abundance:* those who love are not mean but generous (Martha & Mary; the Anointing of Bethany)

Emotions, feelings are involved because of the Blessed Humanity of Christ:

- *The place of encounter between God and man;*
- *The sacrament of our salvation;*
- *The model of our perfection;*
- *Therefore the object of our love and contemplation.*

Because of Jesus living in people: experience God in friendship “Whatsoever you do to the least of my brothers and sisters it is to me that you do it” says Jesus. And Jesus is God.

WHAT IS PRAYER?

1. **Essential Prayer:**

Vital dependence on God. Existential feeling of our creatureliness, our fragility and the fact of our life being in God’s hands: Psalm 90. God is a loving Father: Psalm 23, 131.
 “Prayer is loving acceptance of God’s loving will in my life” (K: Rhaner).

2. **Actual Prayer:** the fact of saying prayers or praying: external orientation: spending time, bringing gifts...

Types of prayer:

Vocal: of the lips

Mental: of the mind

Lectio Divina: *Lectio:* reading

Meditatio: reflecting

Oratio: praying

Contemplatio: contemplation

Collatio: sharing

3. **Contemplation:** the prayer of the heart, prayer of simplicity, prayer of quiet.

Awareness of God’s presence. “A long, loving look at God who is here/there/everywhere. Saint Ignatius of Loyola: Becoming contemplative or seeing God in everything, in all things:

1. God is present with his gifts: thanksgiving, gratitude
2. God is present within the gifts: reverence
3. God is active in the heart of reality/matter: service
 “In Him we live, in Him we move, in Him we exist” (Acts 17:28).

The Spiritual Director guides, helps, facilitates, accompanies our love relationship with God, our Prayer Life.

SPIRITUAL DIRECTION AND DISCERNMENT

Biblical references: Ephesians 4:1-7.11-13; John 1:43-51; Romans 8; Philippians 1:1-11; 1 John 4:1-6; Psalm 139....

Spiritual Direction is totally concerned with discernment: conversation between two people in God’s presence, aiming at dispelling the obstacles along the spiritual journey. The Spiritual Director helps to discern:

- *Inaccurate faith views*
- *Distorted images of God*
- *Spiritual blindness or schotosis*
- *Inordinate attachments, our way of being comfortable, doing things my way*
- *Resistances of living for Christ/putting in practice the Gospel values/Beatitudes (Christ's value system)*

Discernment: the fruit of a deeper yes to God in the here and now; to try to find God's word for me here and now and to say yes. Discernment is either individual or communitarian. Discernment is both a way of life and a process of deliberation. The second works in the context of the first: the process will not work if it is not a way of life first.

- A. Discernment as a way of life: listening attentively to myself, others, the world, Scripture (all created reality) so I can catch the voice of the Creator calling me to him. Every circumstance of our life is an opportunity to meet the Lord.

4 STEPS:

1. Dynamic view of the present circumstances as the place where God acts, here and now, calling me. To see God in everything, in all things. Incarnational spirituality: like God became man in Jesus, in a similar way, He touches me through the happenings of my present life. The sacrament of the present moment. To make me able to find God in the present happenings, I have to *Examine my consciousness*, the flow/stream of consciousness (Ashenbrenner). *5 moments:*

(1) *Move into the awareness of God's presence: How is God working in all this, everything?*

(2) *Gratitude: Thank you, Lord!*

(3) *How did you try to break through to me, Lord, today?*

(4) *The negative moments of my response*

(5) *Ask forgiveness and commit yourself to listen/look for the Lord in the flow of consciousness tomorrow.*

2. Dynamic view of my past life as salvation history. My past is separated from the present by chronology, time, but my memory brings to the present. It becomes an opportunity to recognize the Lord's work in my past (dynamism) or to heal the memories of their negative content through God's grace.

The negative experiences become positive through prayer, God's grace, God's presence. Healing of memories.

Nobody is perfect. We live through the concrete circumstances and find an equilibrium/balance/self-esteem/self-worth because /with the Lord. Everything must become life-giving/positive/constructive/peaceful.

3. (In the dynamism of the presence and the past there is the Lord) Personal relationship with God in /through/with JESUS, THE WAY TO THE FATHER. "To know me is to know the Father". The place of the Blessed Humanity of Jesus in my spirituality. All the saints went to God through Jesus/to perfection through Jesus (Cf. Teresa of Avila's statement in her Autobiography quoted in the Breviary, October 15).

IGNATIAN CONTEMPLATION: of the mysteries/happenings of Jesus' life and death, etc. through the Gospels' accounts. To stand inside the mystery, using our imagination. Aim: to become like Jesus, to assimilate his value system, same feelings, to love Him affectionately...

4. SENTIRE CUM JESUS: to have the same feelings (*sentire*) as Jesus:

- Feelings are neither good nor bad (instinctive reactions)
 - *Recognize the feeling to be there*
 - *Acknowledge the feeling as yours*
 - *Reflect (cool down) on it: where is it coming from, where is it taking me?*
 - *Act upon the feeling: accept the feeling if good, control if negative, reject...*

The Spiritual Director helps the person to get in touch with her/his feelings and to control them through prayer and reflection.

AGERE CONTRA/ORARE CONTRA: traditional ascetic discipline of self control (freedom from inordinate attachments). Prayer for inner freedom in order to overcome psychological mechanisms of resistance:

- *Procrastination*: to delay commitment to face the feeling
- *Rationalization*: attempt to justify
- *Fear of suffering*: act on the feeling, even if painful, to gain your freedom for Jesus.

B. DISCERNEMENT AS A PROCESS OF DELIBERATION

This type of discernment is better done within the Discernment as a way of life. It is a process meant to reach a decision/choice about important matters, especially vocation or status in life.

STEPS in prayer:

- *Clarify* the options
- *Gathering data*
- *Praying* for freedom to take a decision
- *Apply "touchstone"*: enter into a trial-experience connected with the choice and see the reaction of your feelings: joy/serenity/fullness of heart or restlessness/dissatisfaction
- *Decide* where the Lord gives the deepest feeling. St. Ignatius of Loyola, master of discernment, gives a help for decision:
 - *Imagine you are in your death bed....*
 - *Pretend to be the Spiritual Director...*
 - *Imagine to be before God, at the Last Judgement...*
- *Confirmation*: once the choice is made, in the course of living it out, if we experience habitual peace of mind/joy.

JESUS AS SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR

Jesus is our model in his dealing with different people about their journey to God, affirming, suggesting, correcting: Nicodemus, Samaritan woman, Nathanael, Rich young man, disciples of Emmaus....

The best example is Jesus' relationship with Peter:

John 1:41-42 Jesus looks intensely at Simon and gives him his new name: Peter

Luke 5 Peter is attracted but afraid: "Go away from me, I am a sinner"

Jesus lived with Peter and the disciples or better he made them live with him ("Come & see...Follow me...They lived with him". Jesus prayed in front of his disciples and taught them how to pray (Spiritual Direction in an atmosphere of prayer). Jesus announces his ideal and way of life- New Law: the Beatitudes and the consequences (*Matthew 5,6 &7*) : Spiritual Direction is never man to man, but always under the light of God and the example of Jesus: best Spiritual Direction is done by the Risen Christ. Jesus scalds/expresses frustration/reprocess... Jesus heals, expels demons...

Matthew 14:22-23 (Jesus walking on the water with Peter): Spiritual Director like Jesus take the person by the hand to give a hand to overcome difficulties...

Matthew 16:13-21 (Peter's profession of faith): a moment of grace: to make one aware, point out to him/her that this is what happened... Then Jesus' reproaches to Peter: he should have known better! 24-28: take up your cross daily...Starting to live out Christ's sequel which includes the cross...

Matthew 17 (The Transfiguration) like a day of recollection: not too much talking, but listening to Jesus...

Matthew 18:21-22 (Forgiving) to forgive ourselves and to forgive others is one of the most important sign of the Kingdom of God.

John 13:6-11 (Peter at the Washing of the feet): learn how to receive. Jesus washes our feet to teach us how to receive because love is giving & receiving.

Matthew 26:31-46 (Gethsemane) Peter boasts his fidelity and Jesus prophesizes Peter's denial...Jesus asks for support...he prays against himself... Peter fails to support ... In *John 18:10-11*, Peter cuts the ear of Malchus and Jesus gives a lesson of non-violence.

Luke 22:61-62: Peter's failure and sin is the occasion of his quality leap because he experiences humility and repentance as a consequence of the fact that the Lord turned and looked at him and Peter wept bitterly.

John 21:15-17: redress of the denial, mature love and the implications: no more escaping from the cross. Jesus makes Peter take the quality leap.

"God did not call us to be successful but to be faithful" (Mother Teresa).

BIBLE REFERENCES ABOUT SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

Qoheleth 4:7-12 Better to be two in life: the need for help

Tobit 4:18 “Ask advice of every wise person; never scorn any profitable advice”

Sirach 37:7-15 Avoid false advisers, listen to good ones, but especially follow the advice of your heart and of God.

Psalms 23 The Lord is my Shepherd

Psalms 90 Our human existence in God’s light: beautiful and wise.

Psalms 131 Childlike trust in God

Psalms 139 Against spiritual blindness: God knows me

Mark 10:17-27 Jesus and the rich young man (a case of failure of the Spiritual Director because of greed in the disciple)

Matthew 25:1-13 The foolish bridesmaids (a failure because of stupidity/foolishness/ignorance)

Acts 9:1-19 Paul’s conversion and Ananias (17-19)

Acts 18:24-26 Apollos helped by Aquila and Priscila

Acts 20:17-37 Speech of Paul to the elders of the church in Ephesus at Miletus (verse 31)

Galatians 5:13-25 Need to discern “Walk by the Spirit and do not gratify the flesh (the fruits of the Spirit)”

1 Thessalonians 2:7-13 Love and respect “We were gentle among you like a nurse talking care of her children”

1 Corinthians 12,13 Variety of charisms/gifts but the same Spirit. The best gift is love.

Romans 7,8 Spiritual struggle and life in the Spirit

2 Timothy 1:1-13 Teacher and disciple “I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you”

2 Corinthians 13:5-14 Responsibility “Examine yourselves in order to see whether you are holding with your faith”

Ephesians 4:1-13 Walking along: journey of formation and the help of the community

1 John 4:1-6 Discernment of spirits

ABOUT THE LOVE OF GOD

Isaiah 43:1-7 God’s love for me

Luke 1:26-38 Annunciation: Mary’s Trinitarian Experience/Affirmation

Luke 10:36-42 Martha and Mary

EROS AND AGAPE

by Fr. Lorenzo Carraro MCCJ (2019)

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Introduction:

THE EROS OF JESUS AND MY EROS

(to love as Jesus loved)

The choice of the topic came from a recent book by the title: *Come Lui ha amato:*

L' Eros di Jesus (As He has loved : Jesus' Eros), by Aristide Fumagalli, diocesan priest and theologian, Edizioni San Paolo 2010.

The basic idea comes from Jesus' words: **"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.** Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant doesn't know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide; so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. This I command you, to love one another" (*John 15:12-17*)

The evangelist who gave us these words of Jesus, was reclining on Jesus' breast: "One of his disciples, whom Jesus loved, was lying close to the breast of Jesus" (*John 13:23*).

How was Jesus' ways of loving, his Eros? Since he told us to love as he loves, the way he loved....

So, it is from the Gospel of John that the author develops his original approach, analyzing and describing the different ways the loving instinct of Jesus, his "love making" is shown in his relationships with the different people/characters.

These are the traits of Jesus' loving as seen by the author:

- with John the Baptist: fascination;
- with Nicodemus: discretion;
- with the Samaritan woman: seduction;
- with the adulteress: conquest;
- with Mary of Bethany: intimacy;
- with the beloved disciple: confidence;
- with Judas: passion;
- with Mary Magdalene: freedom;
- with Peter: commitment.

The Eros of Jesus is nothing new, although pushed to the extreme because of the Incarnation: God is with us in Jesus as one of us. Jesus' Eros continues Yahweh's Eros in the Old Testament. In the Gospels, there is also the Eros of those who answer to Jesus' love. We will see examples of this presently.

In the Old Testament, we have the anthropomorphic expressions of God's love for us: i. e. the many touching ways the love of God for his chosen people assumes mostly in a masculine fashion but sometimes with feminine overtones. Pope Benedict XVI writes about Eros and Agape in his encyclical **Deus caritas est** (2005). The words of Benedict XVI about Eros (ascending love) and Agape (descending love) are quoted by the author of the book and are the inspiration of his analysis of John's

Gospel. The pope shows how the two types of love: Eros (sexual, sensual, emotional, sentimental love) and Agape (outgoing, generous, serving, self-forgetting, sacrificial love) tend to meet and integrate.

1. **EROS and AGAPE are two necessary aspects of our spirituality.**

The place of EROS (From Benedict XVI: DEUS CARITAS EST, 6-9)

“Nowadays Christianity of the past is often criticized as having been opposed to the body; and it is quite true that tendencies of this sort have always existed. Yet the contemporary way of exalting the body is deceptive. *Eros*, reduced to pure “sex”, has become a commodity, a mere “thing” to be bought and sold, or rather, man himself becomes a commodity. This is hardly man’s great “yes” to the body.

On the contrary, he now considers his body and his sexuality as the purely material part of himself, to be used and exploited at will. Nor does he see it as an arena for the exercised of his freedom, but as a mere object that he attempts as he pleases, to make both enjoyable and harmless.

Here we are actually dealing with a debasement of the human body: no longer is it integrated into our overall existential freedom; no longer is it a vital expression of our whole being, but it is more or less relegated to the purely biological sphere. The apparent exaltation of the body can quickly turn into a hatred of bodiliness.

The Christian faith, on the other hand, has always considered man a unity in duality, a reality in which spirit and matter compenetrates, and in which each is brought to a new nobility. True, *eros* tends to rise “in ecstasy” towards the Divine, to lead us beyond ourselves; yet for this very reason it calls for a path of ascent, renunciation, purification and healing.

6. Concretely, what does this path of ascent and purification entail? How might love be experienced so that it can fully realize its human and divine promise? Here we can find a first, important indication in the *Song of Songs*, an Old Testament book well-known to the mystics. According to the interpretation generally held today, the poems contained in this book were originally love songs, perhaps intended for a Jewish wedding feast and meant to exalt conjugal love.

In this context it is highly instructive to note that in the course of the book two different Hebrew words are used to indicate “love”. First there is the word *dodim*, a plural form suggesting a love that is still insecure, indeterminate and searching. This comes to be replaced by the word *ahabà*, which the Greek version of the Old Testament translates with the similar-sounding *agape*, which, as we have seen, becomes the typical expression for the biblical notion of love.

By contrast with an indeterminate, “searching” love, this word expresses the experience of a love which involves a real discovery of the other, moving beyond the selfish character that prevailed earlier. Love now becomes concern and care for the other. No longer is it self-seeking, a sinking in the intoxication of happiness; instead it seeks the good of the beloved: it becomes renunciation and it is ready, and even willing, for sacrifice.

It is part of love’s growth towards higher levels and inward purification that it now seeks to become definitive, and it does so in a twofold sense: both in the sense of exclusivity (this particular person alone) and in the sense of being “forever”. Love embraces the whole of existence in each of its dimensions, including the dimension of time. It could hardly be otherwise, since its promise looks towards its definitive goal: love looks to the eternal.

Love is indeed “ecstasy”, not in the sense of a moment of intoxication, but rather as a journey, an ongoing exodus out of the closed inward-looking self towards its liberation through self-giving, and thus towards authentic self-discovery and indeed the discovery of God: “Whoever seeks to gain his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will preserve it” (*Luke 17:33*), as Jesus says throughout the Gospels (cf. *Matthew 10:39; 16:25; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24; John 12:25*).

In these words, Jesus portrays his own path, which leads through the Cross to the Resurrection: the path of the grain of wheat that falls to the ground and dies, and in this way bears much fruit. Starting from the depths of his own sacrifice and of the love that reaches fulfillment therein, he also portrays in these words the essence of love and indeed of human life itself.

7. By their own inner logic, these initial, somewhat philosophical reflections on the essence of love have now brought us to the threshold of biblical faith. We began by asking whether the different, or even opposed, meanings of the word “love” point to some profound underlying unity, or whether on the contrary they must remain unconnected, one alongside the other. More significantly, though, we questioned whether the message of love proclaimed to us by the Bible and the Church’s Tradition has some points of contact with the common human experience of love, or whether it is opposed to that experience.

This in turn led us to consider two fundamental words: *eros*, as a term to indicate “worldly” love and *agape*, referring to love grounded in and shaped by faith. The two notions are often contrasted as “ascending” love and “descending” love. There are other, similar classifications, such as the distinction between possessive love and oblation love (*amor concupiscentiae – amor benevolentiae*), to which is sometimes also added love that seeks its own advantage.

In philosophical and theological debate, these distinctions have often been radicalized to the point of establishing a clear antithesis between them: descending, oblation love-*agape*-would be typically Christian, while on the other hand ascending, possessive or covetous love-*eros*-would be typical of non-Christian, and particularly Greek culture.

Were this antithesis to be taken to extremes, the essence of Christianity would be detached from the vital relations fundamental to human existence, and would become a world apart, admirable perhaps, but decisively cut off from the complex fabric of human life. Yet *eros* and *agape*-ascending love and descending love-can never be completely separated. The more the two, in their different aspects, find a proper unity in the one reality of love, the more the true nature of love in general is realized.

Even if *eros* is at first mainly covetous and ascending, a fascination for the great promise of happiness, in drawing near to the other, it is less and less concerned with itself, increasingly seeks the happiness of the other, is concerned more and more with the beloved, bestows itself and wants to “be there for” the other. The element of *agape* thus enters into this love, for otherwise *eros* is impoverished and even loses its own nature.

On the other hand, man cannot live by oblation, descending love alone. He cannot always give, he must also receive. Anyone who wishes to give love must also receive love as a gift. Certainly, as the Lord tells us, one can become a source from which rivers of living water flow (cf. *John 7:37-38*). Yet to become such a source, one must constantly drink anew from the original source, which is Jesus Christ, from whose pierced heart flows the love of God (cf. *John 19:34*).

In the account of Jacob's ladder, the Fathers of the Church saw this inseparable connection between ascending and descending love, between *eros* which seeks God and *agape* which passes on the gift received, symbolized in various ways. In that biblical passage we read how the Patriarch Jacob saw in a dream, above the stone which was his pillow, a ladder reaching up to heaven, on which the angels of God were ascending and descending (cf. *Genesis* 28:12; *John* 1:51).

A particularly striking interpretation of this vision is presented by Pope Gregory the Great in his *Pastoral Rule*. He tells us that the good pastor must be rooted in contemplation. Only in this way will he be able to take upon himself the needs of others and make them his own: "*per pietatis viscera in se infirmitatem caeterorum transferat*".

Saint Gregory speaks in this context of Saint Paul, who was borne aloft to the most exalted mysteries of God, and hence, having descended once more, he was able to become all things to all men (cf. *2 Corinthians* 12:2-4; *1 Corinthians* 9:22).

He also points to the example of Moses, who entered the tabernacle time and again, remaining in dialogue with God, so that when he emerged he could be at the service of his people. "Within [the tent] he is borne aloft through contemplation, while without he is completely engaged in helping those who suffer: *intus in contemplationem rapitur, foris infirmantium negotiis urgetur*."

8. We have thus come to an initial, albeit still somewhat generic response to the two questions raised earlier. Fundamentally, "love" is a single reality, but with different dimensions; at different times, one or other dimension may emerge more clearly. Yet when the two dimensions are totally cut off from one another, the result is a caricature or at least an impoverished form of love.

And we have also seen, synthetically, that biblical faith does not set up a parallel universe, or one opposed to that primordial human phenomenon which is love, but rather accepts the whole man; it intervenes in his search for love in order to purify it and to reveal new dimensions of it. This newness of biblical faith is shown chiefly in two elements which deserve to be highlighted: the image of God and the image of man".

2. A Taste of Eros in the Old Testament

The best example of Eros in the Old Testament is in the Song of Songs. I will give a taste of the Song with commentary by Fathers of the Church and popes.

A taste of the "Song of Songs" with commentary

Song 1:2 "Beloved: "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth. Your love is sweet like wine..."

Saint Bernard has an extensive commentary on the Song of Songs, interpreted allegorically, as referring to the journey of the soul to God, the journey of perfection. Interesting his interpretation of the abrupt and vivid second verse.

He writes: Slowly please, not immediately the kiss of the mouth: we must start from the kiss of the feet like the woman sinner: that is the symbol of the stage of PURIFICATION, the first step in the journey towards perfection.

Then Jesus will raise us up for the kiss of his blessed hands and that will be the sign that we are now on the stage of ILLUMINATION: the second step on the journey towards perfection: the exercise of the human virtues of fortitude, temperance, justice and prudence.

Eventually Jesus will kiss us on the mouth and that will signify our entrance in the third stage: UNION: the life of faith, hope and charity, life in the spirit with its gifts and fruits, a life of contemplation.

Song 2:6 “Beloved: His left arm is under my head, his right embraces me”

The intimacy of the spousal embrace is the symbol of our intimacy with God in prayer, confer *Psalms* 63:6-8 “On my bed I remember you, on you I muse through the night for you have been my help, in the shadow of your wings I rejoice. My soul clings to you, your right hand hold me fast”. A fitting conclusion of this psalm that describes the soul’s longing for God to the point that even “the body pines for God like a dry, weary land without water”.

Song 8:6-7 “Beloved: set me like a seal on your heart, like a seal on your arm. For love is strong as death, passion as relentless as Sheol. The flash of it is a flash of fire, a flame of Yahweh himself. Love no flood can quench, no torrent drown. Were a man offer his family wealth to buy love, contempt is all that he would gain”.

The commentary of Saint John Paul II in his document *Redemptionis Donum* (1985) is beautiful, in relation to consecrated life: “May the knowledge of belonging to God himself in Jesus Christ, *seal your heart*, all your thoughts, words and deeds, with the sign of the biblical spouse...May the knowledge of belonging to Christ, as his exclusive possession, *open your hearts*, thoughts and deeds with the key of the mystery of Redemption, to all the sufferings, needs of individuals and of the world, in the midst of which your evangelical consecration has been planted as a particular sign of the presence of God...”.

This commentary is in line with the traditional allegoric interpretation of the Song of Songs that understands it as a symbol of the love of Yahweh for his chosen people or as in the spiritual interpretation of the mystics like Saint John of the Cross, the love of God for the soul.

This however is based on the data of the biblical love song itself: in it, as Pope Benedict puts it: “Eros tends to rise “in ecstasy” towards the Divine, to lead us beyond ourselves...No longer it is self-seeking, a sinking in the intoxication of happiness; instead it seeks the good of the beloved: it becomes renunciation and it is ready, and even willing, for sacrifice.

It is part of love’s growth towards higher levels and inward purification that it now seeks to be definitive, and it does so in a twofold sense: both in the sense of exclusivity (this particular person alone) and in the sense of being “forever”.

Jacob’s Ladder: Eros and Agape towards a unity

EROS, “ascending” love, and AGAPE, “descending love, tend to form a unity. “The element of Agape thus enter into this love, for otherwise Eros is impoverished and even loses its own nature. On the other hand, man cannot live by oblation, descending love alone. He cannot always give, he must also receive. Anyone who wishes to give love must also receive love as a gift.”

Pope Benedict brings **Jacob’s Ladder** (*Genesis* 28:12; *John* 1:51) as symbol of Ascending love and Descending love in the interpretation of pope Saint Gregory the Great: he tells us that the good pastor must be rooted in contemplation. Only in this way will he be able to take upon himself the needs of the

others and make them his own... Fundamentally, love is a single reality, but with different dimensions (Eros, Agape); at different times, one or other dimension may emerge more clearly” (*Deus caritas est*, 5-8).

3. The Eros of the Gospel characters in relation to Jesus

In the Gospels, Jesus defends and accepts the expressions of human love towards his blessed Humanity: for example the love of the woman/sinner: washing his feet with her tears, drying them with her hair and covering them with kisses.

The best example is with **Mary of Bethany**: In the first episode (*Luke* 10:32-35), Mary sits at the feet of Jesus, looking at him and listening to him. It is a loving passivity. It has no apparent use, complete gratuitousness. She is absorbed by the person of Jesus. Jesus defends her and highly praises her choice: the “better part that nobody will take away from her”.

We find Mary again in the episode of the anointing of Bethany (*John* 12:1-6). Here she is active: she takes the initiative of anointing the feet of Jesus (head), breaking the bottle of precious nard. Her gesture is still apparently without practical use (although Jesus says that she has unknowingly anticipated his burial), but in addition to gratuitousness it is abundant, extravagant: “The house was full of the fragrance of the perfume”. Even on this occasion, Jesus defends her and emphasizes: “She has done a beautiful thing to me...And truly I say to you, wherever the Gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her” (*Mark* 14:3-9).

The Eros and Agape in the Blessed Virgin Mary

Eros is the power of the feeling of love and affection/ it is proper of human beings/ it anthropomorphizes the love of God (when applied to God, as we see in the Bible). **Agape** is descending love, it prevails on the relationship of a mother to her son/daughter; it is more *amor benevolentiae* than *amor concupiscentiae*.

In Mary, *agape* prevails over *eros*. In Mary, love takes the two aspects in her relationship with God the Father and with Jesus:

Mary’s relationship with God the Father takes after Jesus’ love for the Father, especially as seen in the Gospel of John. It assumes the following characteristics: gratitude and praise for the realization of the incredible, exceeding love of God, the Father for her; obedience of Faith; vital dependence and contemplation of God’s plan.

Mary’s love for Jesus: is the vital, unbreakable link of a mother, the one who gave life; she is in syntony/same wavelength with her Son: deepest, closest association to Jesus’ redemptive work on the Cross (*John* 19:26-27); she holds a nurturing empathy for the faith and piety of the first Christian Community (*Acts* 1:13-14).

Conclusion: Loving as Jesus loved

What about us? How is the human quality of our loving? How are our relationships with people? With our friends? With the people we serve in our apostolate? With Jesus, with God? What is the quality of our prayer? How is OUR EROS?

PATHS TO CONTEMPLATION

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PATHS TO CONTEMPLATION

(The title suggested by the Commission for the Silver Jubilee was: *MISSION IN ASIA TODAY FOR THE COMBONI MISSIONARIES IS CONTEMPLATION AND PROCLAMATION OF GOD'S WORD*. The reflection was supposed to be about our experience in Asia, sharing what we have learned, our contribution in this area, some challenges for the future with some questions to guide the reflection and sharing at personal and community level and moreover some suggestions of articles and books for personal reading. As it came out, **my reflection is limited to contemplation** and it is a sharing of my experience and research. Hoping that it may give the confreres some food for thought).

**"THERE IS NOTHING MORE POWERFUL ON EARTH THAN PURITY AND PRAYER"
(TEILLARD DE CHARDIN)**

**"HUMAN BEINGS HAVE A NOBLE TASK: THAT OF PRAYER AND LOVE. TO PRAY
AND TO LOVE: THAT IS THEIR HAPPINESS ON EARTH" (THE CURATE OF ARS)**

**"WE ARE PUT ON EARTH FOR A LITTLE WHILE, THAT WE MAY LEARN TO BEAR
THE BEAMS OF LOVE" (WILLIAM BLAKE)**

**"EVERY PERSON IS ALONE IN THE HEART OF THE EARTH, PIERCED BY A RAY
OF THE SUN, AND IT IS QUICKLY EVENING" (SALVATORE QUASIMODO)**

Contemplation: A Journey to Holiness

Our starting point is *Matthew* 4:12-5:16, the passage of the beginning of Jesus' public life. It describes the Galilean ministry and it is exemplary for our outlook as missionaries. In the beginning, it is Jesus who is the light of the World, but in the end, Jesus states solemnly that it is us who must be the salt of the earth and the light of the world: "You are the light of the world. A city built on the hill-top cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp to put it under a tub; they put it on the lamp-stand where it shines for everyone in the house. In the same way your light must shine in the sight of men, so that, seen your good works, they may give the praise to your Father in Heaven" (*Matthew* 5:16). We will be the light if we are alive with enthusiasm and generosity, with self-forgetfulness and love, in one word, if we are saints. "The true missionary is the saint" writes Pope John Paul II in his letter *Redemptoris Missio* (90, 91).

You must be contemplative

The pope continues: "The missionary must be a 'contemplative in action'. He finds answer to problems in the light of God's word and in personal and community prayer. My contact with the representatives of the non-Christian spiritual tradition, particularly those of Asia, has confirmed me in the view that the future of mission depends to a great extent on contemplation. Unless the missionary is a contemplative he cannot proclaim Christ in a credible way. He is a witness to the experience of God, and must be able to say with the Apostles: "that which we have looked upon ... concerning the word of life ... we proclaim also to you (1 John 1: 1-3)".

Contemplation is experience. It is therefore something truly personal ("L' esperienza e' una candela che fa' luce solamente a chi la porta"/Experience is a candle that enlightens only the one who carries it); study can help, advice, example can foster contemplation, but only experience can make contemplatives of us. The commitment to experience contemplation is a long life commitment and, at the same time, a gift. We must struggle to become contemplative as if it depended only on us, we must expect it in faith because we know that eventually it is a gift from God. We must be contemplative: i.e. firmly and deeply rooted in the supreme and absolute reality that God is, if we want to persevere in the long journey of faith and life as missionaries and especially if we want to take refuge in God vis-a-vis sometimes insoluble problems and terrible and upsetting happenings.

The inexhaustible mystery of God

In his sermon on the Beatitudes (*Cf. the patristic readings in the Breviary for Thursday and Friday of XII week in the Ordinary Time of the Year*), St Gregory of Nissa reflects on the apparently contradictory message about God that we have in Scripture: on the one hand, we have the sentence in the Gospel of John: "Nobody has ever seen God" (*John* 1: 18; cf. also *1 John* 4: 12); on the other hand, we have the Beatitude: "Happy the pure in heart, they shall see God" (*Matthew* 5:8). His teaching is very suggestive and still very relevant and fresh.

The mystery of God can be compared to a limitless horizon. The more we go up the more the horizon expands and the more we try to approach its borders the more they go far from us. The same is of the mystery of God: the more we enter into its knowledge the more we experience that it is inexhaustible.

Only the pure of heart can see God: the simple, those with a limpid heart, who are able to accept to sail towards a horizon that never ends, they taste its beauty because they do not expect to be able to touch God with their finger! If God is in front of us as a limitless horizon, our life appears as a continuous journey towards God.

God in the Heart of Man

God is not a utopia but a promise that gives thrust to our hope. To hope is not a passive waiting but a commitment in trust towards a certainty that we already, albeit only partially, possess. Even the purity of heart, as any other Christian virtue, is never a totally reached perfection. The commitment of hope consists in the progressive search for a possible holiness which at any rate remains always a promise: if you think you have got it, you lose the purity of heart and you can no longer see God.

You will deceive yourself like the man in the Song of Songs who wanted to purchase love: "Were a man offer all the wealth of his house to buy love, contempt is all he would purchase" (*Song* 8: 7). God may be found in the heart of man. Purity of heart gives us the possibility of seeing God in a deep and true, even if partial, way that can be seen as an anticipation of the beatific vision. For it consists not in knowing some truths about God, but in having God within oneself.

It isn't yet an immediate knowledge and possession (that will only be in heaven), but if we purify our heart, we will be able to contemplate the divine image in the beauty of our own soul. The intimacy that originates between God and us, when we search for Him in sincerity, is so great that it enables us to contemplate within ourselves the true image of God and to relish in it as a present reality (St. Gregory of Nissa).

I. Christian Prayer Facing the East

(I have always been fascinated by the spiritual tradition of the East, even before coming to live and work as a missionary in the Far East. What follows is the fruit of my readings and reflections on the concept of prayer and contemplation that we find in the great eastern tradition and what they can contribute to our search for contemplation).

A considerable number of modern people are practicing meditation and find themselves drawn into deeper states of consciousness that are ordinarily called mystical. Beginning with the repetition of a mantra, or awareness of the breathing, or the savoring of a phrase from sacred Scripture, they feel drawn, beyond thinking and reasoning, to a consciousness wherein they rest silently in the presence of the Great Mystery that envelops the whole universe.

As a mass movement it started in the sixties. The sixties are a decade of change: Vatican II, the students' revolution, the Beatles. At that time the great meditation movement which subsequently spread to the whole western world was in its early phase. Transcendental meditation and yoga and Zen were already in vogue. Unfortunately, the success of yoga and meditation in the consumer societies, is an ambiguous one; it may only mean that they have been assimilated to the prevailing commercialism and have lost their depth and original religious meaning.

In a more serious development, however, Christians were asking if it was possible for them to avail of the riches of oriental spirituality while remaining committed to Christ and to the Gospel. The research and the experimentation of those years have now passed in the mainstream and the novelties are taken from granted, but it is all the same interesting and formative to explore the articulations of that discovery. The Catholic world that was committed to a serious dialogue with the East by means of giants like Bede Griffiths and Thomas Merton, produced also those who acted as guides in the journey of prayer: John Main, Anthony De Mello and William Johnston.

Forerunners of an Encounter

John Main is a clear example of cross fertilization between the religious traditions of the East and the West. It was his encounter with an Indian monk which inspired him in his personal quest for contemplative meditation and eventually made of him a master of a form of meditation that is the fruit of the integration between the eastern influence and the rediscovered western tradition.

The bridge was the calm, continuous repetition of a single word or phrase throughout the time of meditation as a way of bringing our chronically distracted human mind to attention in God and developing poverty of spirit. He wrote: "In contemplative prayer we seek to become the person we are called to be, not by thinking of God but by being with God. Simply to be with God is to be drawn into being the person God calls us to be".

He taught people to pray from a theology of the indwelling Spirit and the inner Christ which opens a new possibility for prayer in our era of secularism. He illustrates the intimate connection between scripture and the prayer of the heart. The universal call to holiness invites a personal contemplative practice in daily life. John Main saw that the modern search for deeper interiority required a simple contemplative discipline that could be practiced daily. From this developed the worldwide community of meditators, the network of Christian Meditation Centers and the weekly meditation groups which

practice his recommended discipline of two daily half hours of meditation.

In **Anthony de Mello**, the best currents of the East and the West flow naturally together. As a native of India, he was culturally equipped to understand the followers of Oriental religions. As a Jesuit, his own spirituality was formed largely by the Spiritual Exercises as well as by theological and psychological studies which he pursued for many years in Europe and the United States. His little book: "*Sadhana, a way to God (Christian exercises in eastern form)*", published in 1978, was a breakthrough when it came out and still remains a classic of modern spirituality.

In it, the author aims to teach interested readers how to pray, through a series of practices drawn from the Church's tradition, St. Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises, oriental techniques stemming from sources such as yoga or Zen Buddhism, and modern psychology. To it, de Mello added books of short stories representing the wisdom of the East in the fragment. They made him immensely popular.

The Mysticism of Silence

In his later works he develops his theory of contemplation as awareness. The concept of Christian revelation makes him recall the sentence of Lao-tse: "Silence is the great revelation". He knows that we are accustomed to think of the Scripture as the revelation of God. And so it is. But he wants us to discover the revelation that silence brings.

He writes: "In exercising an awareness of our bodily sensations, we are already communicating with God", a communication that he explained in these terms. "Many mystics tell us that, in addition to the mind and heart with which we ordinarily communicate with God, we are, all of us, endowed with a mystical mind and mystical heart, a faculty which makes it possible for us to know God directly, to grasp and intuit him in his very being, though in a dark manner.

But this intuition, without images or form, is that of a void: "What do I gaze into when I gaze silently at God? I gaze at a blank." And thus one arrives at "the seemingly disconcerting conclusion that concentration on your breathing or your body sensations is very good contemplation in the strict sense of the word". Interior enlightenment is the true revelation: "When you have knowledge you use a torch to show the way. When you are enlightened you become a torch". This mysticism of stillness and silence recalls the parallel experience of "the dark night" of Saint John of the Cross.

Anthony de Mello however did not realize that he was been carried away by his enthusiasm of learning from the East to the point of overlooking the revelation of God in Christianity. This is why, after his premature death, the Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith published a letter which put in evidence the dangers of de Mello's position.

Well aware of these dangers was instead the other Jesuit, **William Johnston**, who spent most of his life in Japan and, as a scholar of spirituality, was better equipped for this demanding task. He is the author of a book: "*Christian Zen (A Way of Meditation)*", published in 1971, which is also a classic. His enthusiasm for the dialogue with Zen Buddhism became a long life commitment. He writes: "Christians might not only avail of the riches of oriental meditation but they should become leaders in a movement of which Christ would be the center – a meditation movement which would humbly learn from Zen. I have told Japanese Christians- and I believe it is true- that they have an important role to play in the development of Christianity. Their vocation is to renew meditation within the Church (because of their

Zen tradition) and interpret it to the West".

The best example of the truth of this vision is the life experience of a Japanese Dominican priest, Fr. Shigeto Oshida who died in November 2003 at Takamori. He was a convert from Buddhism and a Zen practitioner when he met Christ in the witness of a German friend, during the war. Fr. Oshida was used to share his spiritual journey: how following the noble silence of Zen he had easily believed in the Man who died on the cross proclaiming universal forgiveness. "Forgiveness is silence within silence" explains Fr. Oshida, "To keep silence is to enter the womb of God. Christ is in the heart of Zen". Fr. Oshida's death has been the best illustration of the Christian potentialities of Zen mysticism.

In the convent of Takamori, in the last days of his life, he spent long time contemplating the way autumn dresses the surrounding hills in colors. Looking at the leaves falling gently on the ground, he uttered the words that will remain on his lips until the last breath: "God is marvelous! Amen, Amen!" His face in death was radiant with beauty and peace.

II. Learning from the East

We will analyze the contributions of the East to the western concept of prayer and meditation, guided by William Johnston. Asian meditation is holistic. It stresses the role of the body and teaches us how to sit, how to breathe, how to eat, how to fast, how to sleep, how to watch and how to relax.

Praying with the Body

Balancing Body and Soul: this is the tradition and the teaching of Yoga. Yoga has been experiencing a resurgence, thanks to media images. Yet media images of sophisticated bodily postures send false messages that yoga is an alternative to weights lifting and aerobics and merely a fitness fad. Western mentality tends to take the **asanas** (yoga postures) out of context from a lifestyle that values the balance of body and soul.

Yet Yoga is not equivalent to exercise. Its basic premise has to be upheld. The premise is that we are a whole and spiritual being. The body is only a part of our wholeness. Yet the spirit or soul manifests itself through the body. **Asan** is a Sanskrit word for "seat." To take one's seat means to enter into a state of rest. This involves moving towards a resting position and controlling your breath. The yoga postures are meant to facilitate meditation.

Inner Stillness

Consider the words of Jesus: "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on" (*Matthew 6:25*).

When one sits down to meditate, the first thing is to let go of one's anxieties. And that may include reasoning and thinking together with preoccupation and planning and all the rest. One must let them go. And this is not easy. For, as we all know, the human mind is restless. It looks to the future with fear or anticipation; it looks to the past with nostalgia or with guilt. Seldom does it remain in the here and now.

Yet Jesus tells us clearly to drop anxiety about the future in order to remain in the present. "Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day" (*Matthew 6:34*). In all the great cultures life is symbolized by breath. It is

precisely in experiencing your breath that you experience your life. So just sit quietly with your back straight and become aware of your breathing. As time goes on, the breathing of its own accord becomes deep and abdominal.

The Sino-Japanese tradition has always taught that life and energy well up from the *tanden*, the point which lies about an inch below the navel-which is expressively called the "ocean of energy". And *tanden* breathing is basic not only to meditation but also to judo, fencing, archery, calligraphy, flower-arrangement and the tea-ceremony. One does not attain awareness of breathing overnight. It takes time.

But if one perseveres one gradually comes to realize that this breath is not only the life that fills the body from head to toe. It is more. It is a sharing in the breath of the universe: a cosmic force which penetrates all things. As for Hebrews, they believed that their breath was the breath of God (*ruah*) whose presence gave them life. For Christians the breath, like the wind, symbolizes the Holy Spirit who fills all things with his love, giving wisdom and joy and peace.

Receiving the Love of God

William Johnston writes: "While breathing, you can recite the words: "Come, Holy Spirit", asking to be filled with the breath of the Spirit. And you can let go of anxieties as the conviction of being loved grows and deepens and becomes an unshakable source of strength.

Let me repeat that I am not saying that one should reason and think about faith. Only that one should sit silently, receiving the love of God into the depths of one's being. The principal thing is to receive and to keep receiving the immense love which is being offered. Perhaps we could say that the basis of Christian meditation is the act of being loved. The Song of Songs speaks of opening the door to the Beloved. And Jesus says: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to share his meal, side by side with him" (*Revelation 3:20*).

III. Christian Prayer is always An Encounter with a Personal God

At this point, the roads of the wisdom of the East (Yoga and Zen) and Christian prayer have already parted. The starting point can be similar if not the same, but then, in the course of the journey, the roads diverge. **Christian mysticism is always Christ centered.** The metaphors of darkness, desert, abyss, silence, unknowing used by Christian mystics differ from those non-Christian. Thus it is a "dazzling" darkness, a "fertile" desert, a "love-filled" abyss, a "Word-resonant" silence, a "knowing" unknowing.

For them it is only in the crucified Christ, where the opposites of Word and silence, Life and death coincide, that there is loving access to the Father who dwells in unapproachable light. For the Christian, moreover, love of God and love of neighbor are simultaneous actions. This explains the extraordinary development of the works of charity in Christianity as the fruit of prayer and contemplation.

"Christian prayer is always determined by the structure of the Christian faith, in which the very truth of God and creature shines forth. For this reason, it is defined, properly speaking, as a personal, intimate and profound dialogue between man and God. The essential element of authentic Christian prayer is the meeting of two freedoms, the infinite freedom of God with the finite freedom of man (*Christian Meditation*, letter of the Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith, 1989).

"For me, then - writes W. Johnston - the greatest practical difference between Zen and Christian contemplation is that, whereas Zen regards thoughts and feelings and aspirations of love for God as illusion, I regard these sentiments as-yes, imperfect and inadequate to express the reality, but

nevertheless as true and valid and valuable religious experiences. From Zen I can, and will continue to, learn many things. But I am convinced that it is not the same as the Christian contemplation to which I feel called".

Paul Williams, a Buddhist who found his way back to Christianity, writes: "Buddhism is all about the mind. Mental states are essentially subjective. The great glory of Buddhism is its relevance to the immediate situation of suffering. And suffering springs (naturally) from the mind. The Christian religion instead is all about God and the salvific actions of God through Christ.

Buddhism is working on oneself. For if Buddhism is all about the mind it has to be the mind of someone. And that someone is oneself. But God is not a mental state. Christians who would seek common ground with Buddhists in meditation and "mystical experiences" should be careful that they are not throwing out the Holy Baby with the bathwater.

As for me, in the last analysis, I realized I could not avoid a choice. Did I want to focus on myself for all eternity, or did I want to love the Living God?"

In the Womb of God

"The state of mind that exists when you sit in the right posture is itself enlightenment": this is what the Zen masters teach. In other words, oriental breathing and posture should not be regarded only as warming-up exercises, preparation for the real thing. What we can learn from the East is not just preparatory devices but the art of prayer itself.

For the Orient can teach us to pray with our breathing, to pray with our body, to pray with our whole being. After all, God created the whole person, not just the mind; and he should be adored by the whole person, not just by the mind. Yet another result of this training is that one comes to experience the great wisdom of the body. One whose mind is attuned to his body finds that the body tells him when to eat and when to fast, when to sleep and when to watch, when to work or when to meditate.

Then one proceeds to Enlightenment according to one's own tradition. And yet we believe that "every genuine prayer is done in the Holy Spirit" (*John Paul II*) and in the womb of God is the meeting place of all the saints. The same Spirit is at work in the heart of all men and women, and in the scriptures and traditions of all authentic religions. Now we realize that each religion has its unique message. We learn from one another. Indeed, as we enter more into the third millennium we at last realize that we need one another.

IV. Basic concepts about Contemplation

(After revisiting the basic concepts of prayer, I will point out different paths to contemplation according to the Christian tradition and my personal experience. We should not consider contemplation as something too high and outside our reach. We may discover in us contemplative attitudes that can develop into prayer, become prayer. We can always long and struggle for our intimacy with God... The journey into contemplation will never be completed in this world).

We must distinguish *essential* prayer from *actual* prayer. **Essential** prayer is the attitude or disposition of the mind and of the heart by which we recognize that our life is in God's hands: vital dependence on God. This is the virtue of religion and it is at the same time a point of departure and an unending point of arrival. Karl Rahner defines it as "*Loving acceptance of God's loving will in our life*".

Actual prayer is the formal dedication of our time to the practice of praying. It is the ordinary means for nourishing the essential prayer. The actual prayer is traditionally divided in *Vocal Prayer* (the prayer of the lips), *Mental Prayer* (the prayer of the mind or meditation); and *Contemplative prayer* (the prayer of the heart and will which reaches out to God's presence).

Contemplation is also called: prayer of simplicity, prayer of quiet. It is also described as the **awareness of the presence of God** known and loved at the center of reality and of one's being. When you seek this awareness and find it in faith, you have *acquired* contemplation. When God gives you this awareness in real experience, you have *infused* contemplation.

Contemplation can be:

- **Natural** contemplation: *to see the universal in the detail.*

“To see a World in a Grain of Sand

And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,

Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand

And Eternity in an hour” (*William Blake*).

This is the source of the arts, *poetry*, music, the figurative arts. This is also experienced in *friendship* and love. Beauty gives lightness, breath and inspiration to our being. Love is our being: we are created for beauty and love. They are the fruits of the two ways to God, the ground of our being, to be added to the five philosophical ways: **Via Pulchritudinis** (The Way of Beauty) and **Via Amoris** (The Way of Love). This natural contemplation can prepare for contemplative prayer or become itself contemplative prayer.

- **Ignatian** contemplation: *to stand inside the mysteries of Christ' life by means of our imagination so much as to apply our senses to them.*
- **Contemplation as a long, loving look at God who is there...** This covers every form of involvement of our heart whether during formal prayer (can be during a vocal prayer like the Liturgy of the Hours or the Rosary or as point of arrival of *Lectio Divina*, etc.), or during any other activity or moment, since “true prayer often happens outside formal prayer” (*Gasparino*). This is by way of affirmation (*Kataphatic*): finding God in all things.
- **Contemplation** as standing in front of God in naked faith (negation: *Apophatic*).

V. Paths to Contemplation

(1) Contemplation and self-acceptance

“Then, one of the scribes came up... and asked him: “Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answered: “The first is, ‘Hear, o Israel: the Lord, our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’”. (Mark 12:28-31).

In his answer to the scribe who is questioning him, Jesus takes up elements already present in the Old Testament: the first commandment of the Decalogue that we encounter in *Deuteronomy* 6:5 and the connection between the love of neighbor and the love of self in *Leviticus* 19:18.

Which is therefore the novelty in Jesus' answer? I would like to underline two elements that I think meaningful in Jesus' words. The first is the clarity with which Jesus identifies the heart of the law: the absolute love towards God. The second element in Jesus' answer is to unite the absolute love for God with the love of neighbor and of self, in such a deep way that it not possible to separate one from the others. We find here the three fundamental relational dimensions of the human person: to God, to others and to self.

The love towards God where heart, mind and strength (at present, we would say will) join, is our answer to his gratuitous and unconditional love. Such a love makes possible to love neighbor and self in a true way. In this sense, the love of neighbor and of self, more than being second in the sense of secondary, is a necessary consequence of the first. The love of God becomes visible in the love of neighbor and of self. *"Anyone who says, 'I love God', and hates his brother, is a liar, since a man who doesn't love his brother that he can see cannot love God, whom he has never seen"* (1 John 4:20).

The center of the whole Christian message is the commandment of love: we were born to love. This is the sense of our life: to answer the love God has towards us. What can however happen when we don't love ourselves? Psychology has its specific contribution: it is possible to have a relationship of respect and reciprocity with other people only when we accept ourselves, respect ourselves, and basically love ourselves. Not only, but the absence of self-acceptance and self-esteem, especially when unconscious, can represent an obstacle to recognize and accept God's love for each one of us.

To live in conflict with ourselves because of our lack of self-acceptance and self-esteem, especially when we are not aware of it, is often the cause of our attitudes of aggression, domination, egoism, refusal and manipulation of other people, jealousy, search for power and pleasure, of perceiving other people as a threat.

This situation in the life of the adult person is accompanied by the difficulty of loving and receiving love, of living free relationships in the sense that the individual can be himself/herself, allowing the other to be himself/herself, relationships that are of reciprocity and alterity.

Low self-esteem is not in itself an obstacle in our relationship with the Lord. Our wounded humanity can and should be the privileged place for experiencing God's love and mercy, because his love doesn't depend on our own qualities or virtues and not even on our psychological maturity. God loves us because we are his children.

We need a spirituality that not only would not eliminate our humanity, something impossible to accomplish, but that would integrate it in its aspects of vulnerability and weakness in order to make of it the meeting place with our Lord, because: *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness...For when I am weak, then I am strong"* (2 Corinthians 12: 9.10).

(2) Finding God in all thing *(The Ignatian way of becoming contemplative)*

At the end of his Spiritual Exercises, St. Ignatius invites us to the contemplation to gain divine love, which is a call to grow in contemplating God present in all things. It is a vision of God's immanent and loving presence in all realities so that we may always live "planted in love and built on love".

These are the degrees of God's presence and our response in St. Ignatius' teaching. God is love. He is movement of self-communication. His creative and self-communicating action is expressed in several levels of self-giving or being present to us whom He loves.

- First, God wishes to be present to us in the created gifts that he gives us. God is in his gifts. Therefore, let us not take life for granted; let us not take anything for granted...Let our response be gratitude and thanksgiving. The fruit of this gratefulness is joy and humility: nobody can grateful and unhappy at the same time.
- Moreover, God wishes to be even more present to us by being inside each gift. God's own presence in each gift is revealed by the fact that the creature's limited perfections reflect God's infinite perfection and flow from the goodness of God. "God saw that everything was good" (*Gen 1*). The response is reverence. Let us not rape the world! Let us have the attitude which was proper of St. Francis of Assisi ("Brother Sun, Sister Moon") who felt and expressed the sense of belonging to the same family with all the creatures...Ecological sensitivity and spirituality... Respect for creation. Let our vow of poverty be expressed in this way: to want less and to thank more.
- God wishes still more to be present in us in his self-giving love. He is working constantly in each moment and in each creature to make us happy, to make us partake in the blessedness of his plan of salvation. "My Father goes on working and so do I" (*John 5:17*). Response: let us work ourselves and serve his holy will in all that we do. Praise, reverence and service to God constitute a continuous gift of ourselves in loving surrender back to God who gives himself so completely to us at all times. This is where love becomes contemplation.

Contemplation is therefore a state of being present to God in self-giving so that our whole being is constantly offering itself in love as a pleasing sacrifice to him. "In fact he is not far from any of us, since it is in him that we live, and move, and exist" (*Acts 17:28*).

(3) Contemplation and Consecration (*as Affirmation*)

The starting point is God's love. Contemplation is receiving God's love and answering in love. The Blessed Virgin Mary in the Bible and in the liturgy in the perfect model of the contemplative attitude. **The Immaculate Conception** is a celebration of the gratuitous initiative of the love of God (1 John 4:10). Mary's life starts with the outpouring of this love which heals: "Thinking of you I created you, loving you I make you lovable" (Saint Augustine). It is a celebration of life.

Mary comes into the world not only blessed with the gift of life, but because of the special gift of life which is at the same time preservation, salvation by Christ's grace from all wounds of sin. The gift of this life is a blessing for all. In Mary, we see prefigured the destiny of us all in the blessing which originates in God's universal will of salvation, redemption and sanctification (Original Blessing). This openness to the revelation of God's love in Mary, must become the contemplation and relishing of God's love for me. "If your experience of God is not an experience of joy, you have no right to be a missionary".

That life is a gift and a blessing is the most important perception of true prayer and contemplation. It is a prayer-stance which is wonderment, surprise, joy, tenderness, not as sentimentality or corniness, but love which becomes experience of communion, experience of compassion.

Life is not a joke. A call to love is a call to suffer: to "love until it hurts" (Mother Teresa). Consecration is the obedience of Jesus to the Father's will who wants him to save us by means of/through sacrificial love. Consecration for us is the response in full awareness to God's love understood and accepted; it is self-giving (*Ecstasy*=to go out of oneself). This is also real worship, what pleases God more than

anything else. It is *Salvation*: the way we are saved by God's love revealed in Jesus, our Sacrificed and Risen Lord.

- "For their sake I consecrate myself" (*John 17:19*)
- "You gave me a body to do your will" (*Hebrews 10:5-7*)
- "Offer your bodies as spiritual sacrifice, your worship pleasing to God" (*Romans 12:1*)

By giving back to God the life which we have perceived as a gift, joy and blessing, we are consecrated i.e. we are grafted, joined, united to Jesus, to his sacrificial death and his glorious resurrection. This is true first of all of our baptismal consecration, and then of our Religious Profession. Through the Vows of Chastity, Poverty and Obedience we radically give back to God in love our life so that because of him it may be a gift, blessing and joy for other people, especially the little ones, the poor and most abandoned.

As the beautiful life of Mary, received by the love of the Father and saved, preserved by the merits of the Son's Paschal Mystery, is **immaculate** in view of the ministry of Divine Motherhood, in the same way **our consecration, which is the conscience of our belonging to God as his exclusive possession, seals our heart and life for the service of the missions.**

- "Set me as a seal on your heart, like a seal on your arm" (*Song of Songs 8:6*).
- "May the knowledge of belonging to God himself in Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of the world and Spouse of the Church, seal your hearts, all your thoughts, words and deeds, with the sign of the biblical spouse... May the knowledge of belonging to Christ open your hearts, thoughts and deeds, with the key of the mystery of Redemption, to all the sufferings, needs and hopes of individuals and of the world" (John Paul II, *Redemptionis Donum*, 1985).

Through our consecration we aim at **virginity of the heart**: love repaid with love, gratuity with radicality. It will give us an experience of communion: a love received, appreciated, longed for, searched for, cherished, enjoyed, believed, possessed, reciprocated. "Put me as a seal on your heart, as a seal on your arm". **Consecration will become contemplation when our love becomes tenderness**: sensitivity, youthfulness, vulnerability, affection, benevolence, care, compassion, devotion, humanness, kindness, empathy, tenderheartedness, warmth: Not simply a human quality but a spiritual quality: gift of the Spirit, born of faith.

(4) Contemplation and compassion (as Negation)

But tenderness is also fruit of compassion, virginity of the heart is also silence, loneliness and standing alone in faith. It is the cross: experiencing our vulnerability and bearing it in faith; seeing our fragility and relying on the strength of God. Persevering in the moment of silence and apparent absence of the Omnipresent. This happens especially in 3 instances:

1. *When we become aware that what we have given up in our consecration will no longer be there, will never be there: a person, a house, a career... It will never be there. Our poverty will be always with us. The consistence of renunciation; the unending poverty; the long loneliness: a feeling that is particularly true for us missionaries, because of our provisionality. The sense of our powerlessness.*

If we accept it in the Lord, if we surrender in pure faith, this will generate peace, tolerance, wisdom, tenderness. This will be contemplation. “Don’t bother me, I carry in my body the wounds of Jesus, the Lord” (*Galatians* 6:17). God alone is enough. “Nada te turbe... Solo Dios Basta” (Saint Teresa of Avila).

2. *When we break down, we fall, we experience rebellion, fragility, the weight of evil, sin.* But grace is given to sinners. God carries us in his arms. He can make us new. There is a true virginity of heart in accepting forgiveness and being new again. Tenderness of heart wipes away despondency, despair, withdrawing within ourselves, anger, rejection, regret...

3. *When we experience loneliness, the silence of God and the apparent inutility of our efforts...* The mystery of Jesus’ burial. The mystique of John the Baptist: “He must grow greater, I have to grow smaller. The bride belongs to the bridegroom” (*John* 3:29-30). Tenderness is now experienced as love and compassion. Mary at the tomb, holding Christ’s dead body, the Pietà. It is the experience of failure, of unrequited love, of terminal sickness. To stand in front of God in naked faith is contemplation.

(5) The Bridegroom’s chest/bosom/breast

Jesus is the bridegroom of the soul. This is why throughout the history of Christian spirituality the Saints have focused their attention on the Blessed Humanity of Jesus. In the Bible, the Risen Christ teaches the Apostles to understand him as the hinge/hub/ center of the Holy Scriptures. The preaching/mission comes as result of the experience of Jesus. This experience is meant to become our experience under the grace of the Holy Spirit.

The most wonderful example in the Gospels is that of the encounter/relationship of Jesus with Peter. Another beautiful example in the New Testament is that of Saint Paul. He did not know Jesus during Jesus’ time on earth, but he was changed and transformed by his encounter with the Risen Christ in the grace of the Holy Spirit. So Jesus’ story and mystery became his story and the depth of the mystery of his personality: “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (*Galatians* 2:20. Cf. *Philippians* 3:7-16).

The penetration and the understanding about the Blessed Humanity of Jesus is something which goes beyond the sensible/superficial/exterior experience of the person of Jesus. Jesus himself introduces the Apostles to it. The deep consciousness of Jesus as Savior/Mediator by love is transmitted to the Apostles by the sign of the washing of the feet (*John* 13:1-17). The deepest statement of the need of this personal encounter with Jesus as point of arrival has its perfect expression in the sentence: “Abide with me/make your home in me” (*John* 15).

Throughout the centuries, this is the witness of the Saints: The Blessed Humanity of Jesus is the place where God meets with Humanity; the sacrament of our salvation; the model of our perfection and therefore it should be the object of our love and contemplation. The last expression of it is the image of the Divine Mercy that we find nowadays in almost all our churches. I like the beautiful figure of Jesus in his appealing humanity and the red and white rays that come from his chest.

The chest of the Bridegroom brings us back to the devotion to the Sacred Heart so central in the missionary spirituality of Saint Daniel Comboni. He was the heir of a long tradition. In centuries gone,

on various occasions, the Fathers of the Church had referred to the open side of the Crucified from which blood and water flowed, seeing in this the origin of the sacraments, and by that very fact, the birth of the Church.

“The Bridegroom’s chest gives joy to her spouse”, Saint Bernard tells us. The chest/bosom/breast signifies love and tenderness. It is the feminine, maternal side of God revealed in Jesus. The theme of the open side of the Crucified was introduced into this context. With his lance, the soldier opened the ineffable riches of glory and revealed the heart, the cleft in the rock where humanity finds its refuge. For the mystical writer, Saint Gertrude the Great, the transfixed Heart is the Ark of the Godhead, the place where the divine treasures are kept, and by that very fact, the place where we experience the secrets of God.

Saint Daniel Comboni saw the heart of Jesus beating out of compassion for the terrible condition of the Africans, the poorest and most abandoned of the earth, and was overwhelmed by this love. The Bridegroom’s chest is not only the place of interiority, the refuge of the soul, but also the engine of mission, now as before.

(6) Contemplation and Friendship

“I call you friends because I have made known to you everything I have learnt from my Father” (John 15:15).

To experience Jesus’ friendship is contemplation. To see Jesus in the face of our friends is contemplation. To experience joy in wholesome friendship is contemplation. It is a common experience to contemplate God in a natural phenomenon like a beautiful sunrise or the awesome view of the ocean. But it is as much striking and inspiring to contemplate the goodness of God in the lovely face of a friend. Jesus said: “Whatsoever you do to the least of my brothers it is to me that you do”: this can be true when we give a glass of cool water to a person who is thirsty, but even more when we experience the presence of Jesus in the person of a wholesome friend. True friendship is a gift of God and a friend’s affection is the greatest treasure in life.

VI. Questions for personal reflection

- Where do I experience beauty in my life?
- Do I enjoy friendship in the context of my relationship with God?
- Do I remember with gratitude the moments when I have experienced God, Jesus, my missionary vocation in a sensible, emotional way?
- Am I concerned with the trials of the Church in the world, with the suffering of the poor or am I usually wrapped up in my own problems? Am I able to listen to other people with empathy and patience?
- Do I usually enjoy peace of mind or am I restless, unsatisfied?

- Do I panic when I have nothing to do or do I turn naturally to God in prayer, to study and reflection?
- Does the Mass, the Liturgy of the Hours, fill my heart? Do I find joy in preaching? Which are the Saints who have touched my heart and with whom I identify?
- Do I give enough time to my personal prayer?
- How do I experience my devotion to the Sacred Heart?
- Do I live out my friendships in Jesus' light?
- How can I describe my personal spirituality?

Concluding Prayer:

Lord, teach me how to pray - to be still with you, letting your calm and peace flood my being. And teach me, Lord, stillness of heart in my day-to-day encounters with life. Teach me that way of being in which I meet and encounter life with an outward vitality and a stillness and peace in my heart that come from the trust that you are with me. I ask you this through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Dulcis in fundo:

(I like to quote the following poem by Gerald Manly Hopkins that is very inspirational for a contemplative stance according to the Ignatian spirituality of finding God in all things and Christ in all peoples):

As kingfishers catch fire, dragon flies draw flame;
 As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
 Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
 Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
 Deal out that being indoors each one dwells;
 Selves - goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
 Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.*

I say more: the just man justices;
 Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;
 Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is –

Christ – for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
 Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
 To the Father through the features of men's faces.

Bibliography

Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, London 1973

Mission into the Future

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6. Dreams and Mission
7. Mission into the Future
8. Paschal Mission: the Priesthood of Christ
9. Our Baptismal Priesthood
10. Mary' Mission
11. The Vows and Mission
12. Mission Power Point

Christian Humanism Charter: “Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things; and the God of peace will be with you” (Philippians 4:8-9).

Fr. Lorenzo Carraro, MCCJ

Quezon City, January 2011

Dreams and Mission

1. God's Dream in the Old Testament

Isaiah 2:1-5 (Isaiah 60)

Micah 4:1-5

- The dream is linked to the relationship of God with the people of Israel, to the foundation experiences that inspire the whole reflection of the O.T.: Exodus and the Return of the Exiles.
- It is a consequence of God's new commitment to humanity after the Fall, since the covenant made with Abraham. God blesses Abraham and all the nations of the earth in Abraham. "You are to be a blessing. I shall bless those who bless you and I shall curse those who curse you. And all clans on earth will bless themselves by you." (*Genesis 12:2-3*)
- "Abraham put his faith in Yahweh and this was reckoned to him as uprightness (justice)" (*Genesis 15:6*). The sacrifice of Isaac is the test of Abraham's faithfulness. "I will swear by my own self, Yahweh declares, that because you have done this, because you have not refused me your own beloved son, I will shower blessings on you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the grains of sand on the seashore. All nations on earth will bless themselves by your descendants because you have obeyed my command." (*Genesis 22:15-18*).
- (*Gen 18:18; 26:4; 28:14*); *Sirach 44:21* "The Lord promised him (Abraham) on oath, to bless the nations through his descendants"

The dream is described in Jeremiah and Ezekiel like a New Covenant:

-Jeremiah 31:1-14 (Restoration of Jerusalem)

31-34

-Ezekiel 11:14-21 (a heart of flesh)

“ 37:1-14 (the vision of the bones)

2. God's Dream in the New Testament

Dream of peace and unity and intimacy with God since the Incarnation: (especially Luke's Gospel)

The Song of the Angels at Jesus' birth: "Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth, peace for those He favors." (*Luke 2:14*). This most beautiful statement is already foreseen and described in the two Canticles that precede Jesus' birth.

The Magnificat:

"God's faithful love extends age after age to those who fear Him" (*Luke 1:50*)

The Benedictus:

“Because of the faithful love of our God in which the rising Sun has come from on high to visit us, to give light to those who live in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of Peace” (Luke 1:78-79).

The dream becomes true in Jesus in the reflection of faith of the early church: Christological Hymns—the blessing of Abraham becomes the blessing of Jesus.

Ephesians 1:3-14: God’s plan of salvation: In Jesus the blessing of Abraham is extended to all peoples. The mystery hidden since the foundation of the world and now revealed in Jesus is the call of the Pagans to share Israel’s blessings in Jesus Christ.

Life

Holiness

Unity

Peace

Col 1:15-20 “Because God wanted all fullness to be found in Him and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, everything in heaven and everything on earth, by making peace through His death on the cross” (19-20)

The blessing becomes the realization of the **Destiny of HUMANITY** which is **SALVATION=Life with God (PRE-DESTINATION: not blind fate but the will of a loving God).**

The universal salvific will of God:

1 Timothy 2:1-8 “God our Savior wants everyone to be loved and reach full knowledge of the truth. For there is only one God, and there is only one Mediator between God and Humanity, Himself a human being, Christ Jesus, who offered himself as a ransom for all. He is the evidence (witness) given at the appointed time...”

Roman 8:28-30 “We are well aware that God works with those who love Him, those who have been called in accordance with His purpose, and turns everything to their good. He decides beforehand who were the ones destined to be molded into the pattern of His Son, so that He should be the oldest of many brothers; it was those so destined that he calls; those that he called he justified and those that he had justified he has brought into glory.”

-CHOICE

-VOCATION Faith —————→

-JUSTIFICATION Baptism —————→

-GLORIFICATION

The dream is the Heavenly Jerusalem:

Hebrews 12:18-29

“What you have come to is Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the Heavenly Jerusalem...”

Revelation 21: the Heavenly Jerusalem like a bride prepared for her husband.

Jesus’ Dream: John 17- Jesus’ priestly prayer: the vulnerability of Love ((Jesus prays for unity, yet we Christians are so divided... Jesus doesn’t force us into unity, but loves us into unity. He accepts the vulnerability of love...))

Mission: **GOSPEL WITHOUT BORDERS**: The Dream continues

“The nations will come to its light” (Rev. 21:24) By its (of the Lamb) light shall the nations walk of the Heavenly Jerusalem whose light is the LAMB (*Benedict XVI*).

1. **Commission**, charge, duty to proclaim the Gospel-

“Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel”

“I am not ashamed of the Gospel”

- to proclaim the Gospel is the greatest service that the church can render to Humanity. (EN)
- “It is necessary to renew our commitment to proclaiming the Gospel which is the leaven of freedom and progress, brotherhood, unity and peace”

2. **CHRIST is the best gift** the Church can give to the world / to Asia

- The Blessed Humanity of Jesus:
- Sacrament of our salvation
- Place of the encounter between God and Humanity
- Model of Human perfection
- Object of love and contemplation

CHRIST, Alfa and Omega (Gs 45):

“The Lord is the goal of human history. (“Omega point”, Teilhard de Chardin). The focal point of the desires of History and Civilization, the center of Mankind, the joy of all hearts, and the fulfillment of all aspirations. “ I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.” (*Rev 22:12-13*). “Yesterday, today and forever Jesus Christ is the same” (*Hebrews 13:8*).

3. **The Sign of Martyrdom**

Persecution of Christians is very much a present day reality in India, Middle East, Pakistan and other countries of the world. We are living in a violent time. Statistics tell us that an average of one missionary priest or religious is killed every week. Great martyrs of our time: Blessed John Paul II

whose life was attempted by a Muslim assassin in St. Peter Square in 1981, something which had never happened in the previous history of the Church, and Bishop Oscar Romero, shot dead during the celebration of the Mass in El Salvador.

4. **The Way of Dialogue:** In October 1986, Pope John Paul II called all religions to Assisi to pray for peace. It was a prophetic gesture that prepared the commitment of the Catholic Church to dialogue and peaceful co-existence in the context of our present day pluralistic world. All the same, the commission remains to preach the name of Jesus as the Savior of all.

MISSION INTO THE FUTURE

INTRODUCTION

1. For missionary groups and individuals whose *raison d'être* (the reason for existence) and charism are mission *ad gentes* and evangelization, to try to outline the contours of tomorrow's mission, its horizons and objectives, the challenges that come to it from Vatican II and globalization, is a task that cannot possibly be avoided.

2. The ways of Mission have been many and various throughout the centuries. We have reached a time when a **paradigm shift** is necessary so that mission may respond to the changed circumstances of our time (Cfr. "*Transforming Mission*" by David J. Bosch).

3. This is the purpose of the efforts, labors and striving of all who try to understand what Mission is in the present time and especially what it will be in the future. Mission has not reached its end line; it only means that we must find a new way of living it. To continue stubbornly on the old way, making appeal to "old times" generosity, looks like some "aggressive therapy" that increases frustration and crisis instead of overcoming them.

4. Mission is not something that you decide simply at intellectual or rational level: it is a gift and a call. We are not sure of the orientation that the mission will take in the future. As the experience of centuries teaches us, the path of mission will be understood only by going through it.

5. *Mission is always a faith option to walk with Jesus, the Way, the Truth and the Life. He is the only way to life. To understand Mission will always be to fix our eyes in Jesus and His sacrificial love for humanity.*

6. *The paths of Mission are always old and always new. The wealth of missionary tradition is for us the present day experience of hundred of confreres and con-sisters who are enduring life and missionary service with the poorest of the poor or in situation of danger and persecution.*

ENLIGHTENING PRINCIPLES

We may find some food for thought and reflection in the following captions from the Bible and the Magisterium, especially RM:

MISSIONARY ACTIVITY

- “Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel” (1 Co 9:16)
- “I am not ashamed of the Gospel. It is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Rom 1:16)
- “The mission of the Church is only beginning” (John Paul II)
- “The missionary thrust belongs to the very nature of Christian life. There is a new awareness that missionary activity is a matter for all Christians”.
- “Faith is strengthened when it is given to others”.
- “Missionary activity renews the Church, revitalizes faith and Christian identity and offers fresh enthusiasm and new incentive”.
- “Missionary evangelization is the primary service which the Church can render to every individual and to all humanity”.
- “Jesus Christ is the best gift that the Church can give to Asia and to the world”.

PROCLAMATION AND DIALOGUE

- “God our Savior wants everyone to be saved and reach full knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim 2:4).
- “The Holy Spirit is the principle agent of Mission”.
- “We are obliged to hold that the Holy Spirit offers everyone the possibility of sharing in the Paschal Mystery in a manner known to God”.
- “The Spirit presence and activity affect not only individuals but also society and history, peoples, cultures and religions”.
- “Every authentic prayer is prompted by the Holy Spirit, who is mysteriously present in every human heart”.
- “Other religions constitute a positive challenge for the Church”.
- “Dialogue is based on hope and will bear fruit in the Spirit”.
- “Our times are both momentous and fascinating”.

PARADIGM SHIFT

1. The “**paradigm shift**” represents a transformation, a change. It does not represent something absolutely new but a new way of expressing the eternal mission. It can be compared to the changes that happen in a living being: e.g. the adolescent or the adult is different from the child but it is the same person.

2. An important but rather exterior change is the cessation of the **IUS COMMISSIONIS** and the emerging of the **LOCAL CHURCHES** and **their missionary responsibility**. The missionary call regards all the baptized.

3. A deeper change is that **the mission of the Church is seen within the mission of God (MISSIO DEI), the mission of the Trinity**. This brings a **more positive approach** to the problem of salvation. From **EXTRA ECLESIA NULLA SALUS** to the **UNIVERSAL SALVIFIC WILL OF GOD**.

4. **The proclamation of Jesus**, the Savior of all, is necessary and essential, first by the example of life, then by the preaching of the Gospel and the planting of the Church. A beautiful perspective is Jesus, the revelation of God's love for the victims of the world, joining them through his paschal sacrifice and so redeeming them.

5. The most fruitful principle is the **MISSION OF THE HOLY SPIRIT** who is present in the non-Christian traditions and religions, before the arrival of the missionary: **the soil that you tread is holy ground.**

6. **Simple Inculturation Statement:**

- Jesus approves and blesses whatever is good in us and in our culture;
- Jesus rejects and condemns whatever is bad in us and in our culture;
- Jesus gives us the fullness of life.

Reference sources: *The Documents of Vatican II: Lumen Gentium (13-17); Gaudium et Spes (10, 15, 22); Ad Gentes (2-9). Other documents: 1990, Redemptoris Missio (21-30); 1999, Ecclesia in Asia (10); 2000, Dominus Jesus.*

THE MISSION OF THE SPIRIT

(THE SPIRIT IS THE PROTAGONIST OF MISSION)

Jesus and the Spirit

The Lord Jesus is alive and present in all the most diverse situations of time and space by means of the Holy Spirit. Full of the Spirit, the risen Jesus gives the Spirit to all flesh and presents himself alive and life giving to all human generations in the same Spirit.

The abysmal gap of centuries that separates us from the story of the Son in the flesh is bridged thanks to the action of the Paraclete, the Consoler. In the Spirit Jesus takes possession nowadays of the hearts that open themselves to him both in the listening to the Word and in the participation to the sacraments, and more generally in the acceptance of the mystery of life and death and in the experience of charity, solidarity and justice.

The Holy Spirit is the powerful memory of Christ, the Lord who gives life, because it makes present here and now the Living Christ beyond all social, racial, cultural and religious barriers.

Recognizing the mission of the Spirit

It becomes therefore necessary to ask ourselves if and in what measure our ecclesial communities are able to live out, within themselves and in their respectful and friendly relationship with other groupings, **the profound communion** that unites them in the one Lord and the one Spirit, welcoming one another mutually in charity.

In no lesser degree, there emerges the urgency of asking ourselves if and how they **recognize the diversity of the gifts** of the Spirit not only within themselves and in the wider

community of the Church, but also in the ordinary life of so many men and women who are temple of the Spirit, sometimes even beyond their consciousness or awareness of it.

In one word, we must **recognize the Spirit** who blows wherever he wishes, **wherever he may blow**, without rigidity or set attitudes, without prejudices or forcing, without closing ourselves in by making an absolute of our belonging to the body of the Catholic Church. "Where the Spirit is there is freedom"(2 Cor 3:17).

The Spirit is there and is at work everywhere; he was there and at work before us, he operates more than us and better than us.

Carlo Maria Martini

THE TRUE MISSIONARY IS THE SAINT

2 Cor 3:18 4:1-6

*"And we with our unveiled faces reflecting like mirrors the brightness of the Lord, all **grow brighter and brighter** as we are turned into the image that we reflect; this is the work of the Lord who is Spirit. Since we have by an act of mercy been entrusted with this work of administration, there is no weakening on our part. On the contrary, we will have none of the reticence of those who are ashamed, no deceitfulness or watering down the Word of God; but the way we commend ourselves to every human being with a conscience is by stating the truth openly in the sight of God...For it not ourselves that we are preaching, but Christ Jesus as the Lord and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. It is the same God that said, 'Let there be light shining out of darkness', who **has shone in our minds to radiate the light of the knowledge of God's glory, the glory on the face of Christ**".*

In order to shine like Jesus **the missionary** must be:

- a contemplative;
- a person of the Beatitudes;
- a witness of joy and hope.

(See RM, 87-91: Missionary Spirituality)

HINTS FOR CONTEMPLATION AND PRAYER

1. The universal salvific will of God: A truth which should be dear to missionaries:

1 Tim 2: 1-8
Acts 10: 34-35

- This is "Predestination":
 - Rom 8: 28-39

- This is the “Original Blessing”:
 - Eph. 1: 3-14

2. The Lord Jesus’ amazing openness to recognize the gifts of the pagans:

- The centurion, Mt 8:5-13 (10-11)
- The Canaanite woman, Mt 15:21-28

3. Paschal Mission: Mission as com-passion of God for the world: *Jesus on the Cross is the revelation that God sides with the victims, comes to share their predicament:*

- Heb 10: 4-24
- Heb 12: 1-4

*All human life has a paschal configuration: its pattern continually moves through death to a renewed life. Paschal dimensions are characteristic of all life situations: they describe the reality of human brokenness and suffering. Especially they describe the reality of the victims of our society. **“We must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the Paschal Mystery” (GS 22).** Christian faith is a Paschal faith. Christian life requires a continual conversion to paschality: to the mystery of the crucified and risen Jesus. We need a “crucified mind” not a “crusading mind”. The Church must be a caring community of compassion. To live is to be missionary. Missionaries witness the passion of God for Humanity., especially his com-passion for the victims with whom the crucified Lord identifies. CRUX PROBAT OMNIA: the Cross is the litmus paper of everything.*

4. The Holy Friday Icon: the Unveiling of the Cross.

It is as if Christ’s sacrifice were discovered afresh by the faithful and with Jesus Christ, the innocent victims of human, political, religious violence... Progressive unveiling and then the procession to adore the Cross, to kiss the Crucified Jesus, and in/with him all the victims...In touching Jesus’ wounds, it is the whole body of Christ made up by the victims, the marginalized, the excluded that is recognized and honored. From Jesus’ lips goes up the invocation of forgiveness even for the executioners and this points to the reality of the resurrection when every tear will be wiped away.

- Luke 22: 39-46
- Matthew 27: 45-56

PASCHAL MISSION:

MISSION AS COM-PASSION OF GOD FOR THE WORLD, HUMANITY:

The Priesthood of Christ

Introduction

The Greatest Christian Mystery or the most important truth of our Christian faith is THE INCARNATION.

The incarnation is the person of Jesus Christ, God and Man, and his mystery, his story: life, death and resurrection.

The Blessed Humanity of Jesus is the object of our contemplation. The Sacred Heart is the center of this Blessed Humanity: it represents and focuses on the human love of Jesus in the moment of his supreme sacrifice.

Jesus' redeeming work is described in the New Testament with 3 main categories:

- **Salvation:** it points to life;
- **Redemption:** it points to Freedom (**Liberation** is another word for redemption);
- **Mediation:** it points to Unity between Humanity and God and it introduces the category of Priesthood: Jesus Christ is the Mediator/the High Priest of the New Testament.

This is the object of our reflection, a biblical reflection: The Priesthood of Christ.

The fact of the Pascal Mystery: the death and resurrection of Jesus is the object of theological reflection in order to understand its meaning and its connection with our life (*Fides quaerens intellectum*). The theological category of priesthood is used by the author of the letter to the Hebrews since the time of the first generation of Christians: remarkable and impressive. It is deep theology, sound reflection generating surprise, wonder, awe, love, adoration, imitation.

1. THE PRIESTHOOD OF CHRIST: MEDIATION OF LOVE

The term "mediator" appears 4 times in the New testament: 3 times in Hebrews (8:6; 9:15; 12: 24), one time in 1 Timothy 2:1-8.

MEDIATION is the best term to describe or define the mission of the Priest: to bridge the infinite gap between God and Humanity.

-This is how the letter to the *Hebrews* describes the Priesthood of Christ: the whole letter is a demonstration of the superiority of the worship, the sanctuary and the mediation of Christ, the supreme high priest of the New Testament:

“We have seen that he (Christ) has been given a ministry of a far higher order, and to the same degree it is a better covenant of which he is the MEDIATOR, founded on better promises” (Hebrews 8:6).

-This is how the same concept is neatly summarized and clearly expressed by the *Magisterium*:

“Jesus Christ has revealed in himself the perfect and definitive features of the priesthood of the new Covenant. He did this throughout his earthly life, but especially in the central event of his passion, Death and Resurrection.

As the author of the Letter to the Hebrews writes, Jesus, being a man like us and at the same time the only begotten Son of God, is in his very being **the perfect mediator between the Father and Humanity** (Cf. Heb 8-9)”.

“The priesthood of Christ, the expression of his absolute “newness” in salvation history, constitutes the one source and essential model of the priesthood shared by all Christian and the priest in particular. Reference to Christ is thus the absolutely necessary key for understanding the reality of priesthood”.

PDV 12, 13

Technically Christ is the one and only true mediator: he is true man and true God, Col 2:9, and so the one and only intermediary, Rom 5:15-19; 1Tim 2:5; cf. 1 Co 3:22-23; 11:3, between God and the human race. He unites them and reconciles them, 2 Co 5:14-20. Through him come grace, Jo 1:16-17; Ep 1:7, and complete revelation, Heb 1:1-2. In heaven he continues to intercede for those who are faithful to him, 7:25.

Mediation describes the essence of the mission of the Priesthood and Priesthood on its turn embraces all the other theological categories that we find in the New Testament to describe Jesus Christ’s work and mission: Salvation/Redemption/Liberation.

It is the very purpose of these reflections to elaborate on the meaning of this mediation to which Jesus associate us, his Church, the priestly people, and to see what it means in terms of spirituality: how we live up to the expectations of our priestly spirituality.

2. THE FORMS OF CHRIST'S LOVING MEDIATION:

Mediation of life: Phil. 2:6-11

“In your mind you must be the same as Christ Jesus: His state was divine, yet he did not cling to his equality with God, but emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave, and became as men are; and being as all men are, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross. But God raised him high and gave him the name which is above all other names so that all beings in the heavens, on earth and in the underworld, should bend the knee at the name of Jesus and that every tongue should acclaim Jesus Christ as Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

Mediation of sacrifice: Hebrews 10: 4-21

“Bull’s blood and goats’ blood are useless for taking away sins, and this is what he said, on coming into the world: *You who wanted no sacrifice or oblation, prepared a body for me. You took no pleasure in holocausts or sacrifices for sin; then I said, just as I was commanded in the scroll of the book, ‘God, here I am! I am coming to obey your will.’*”

Notice that he says first: You did not want the Law lays down as the things to be offered, that is: the sacrifices, the oblation, the holocausts and the sacrifices for sin, and you took no pleasure in them; and then he says: Here I am! I am coming to obey your will. He is abolishing the first sort to replace it with the second. And this *will* was for us to be made holy by the offering of his body made once and for all by Jesus Christ...

In other words, brothers, through the blood of Jesus we have the right to enter the sanctuary, by a new way which he has opened for us, a living opening through the curtain, that is to say, his body. And we have the supreme high priest over all the house of God. So as we go in let us be sincere in heart and filled with faith, our minds sprinkled and free from any trace of bad conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us keep firm in the hope we profess, because the one who made the promise is faithful. Let us be concerned for each other to stir a response in love and good works. Do not stay away from the meetings of the community, as some do, but encourage each other to go; the more so as you see the Day drawing near”.

Mediation of Intercession: Hebrews 7:23-28

“The former priest were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office; but Christ holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues for ever. Consequently he is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since **he always lives to make intercession for them.** For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, blameless, unstained, separated from sinners, exalted above the heavens. He has no need like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people; he did this once and for all when he offered up himself. Indeed, the law appoints men in their weakness as high

priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever”

The intercession that Jesus offers now, sitting at the right hand of the father in heaven, he had already started during his earthly life as we have the beautiful example of his prayers recorded in the gospels:

Matthew 11:25-30

John 11:41-42

John 17: the priestly prayer

3. THE PRIESTHOOD OF CHRIST AND THE EUCHARIST

Pope Benedict wrote some very beautiful reflection in this context:

The exemplary figure of Melchizedek: Genesis 14:18-20 taken up in the messianic psalm 110, becomes the type of the priesthood of the Messiah:

“The Lord has sworn an oath and will not change his mind, ‘You are a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek” (Ps. 110:4).

Melchizedek is

- Priest of the Most High God
- King of peace
- Without genealogy
- **Offers bread and wine**
- Blesses Abraham
- Abraham pays tribute to him

“Christ in the Blessed Sacrament is the real and eternal presence of Jesus as a priest”

The Eucharist is the anticipation of Jesus Passover: his Priestly Sacrifice. Saint Paul in Hebrews 5:7-10 presents the Passion as **a prayer and an offering:**

‘ In the day of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered, and being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek”.

Jesus’ will is in perfect union with the will of the Father, in this way giving origin to the definition of prayer as we find in Karl Rahner: **“Prayer is the loving acceptance of God’s loving will in our**

life". Lived in prayer, the tragic destiny that Jesus faces is transformed into an offering, a living sacrifice. The Father heard him/listened to him when he resurrected him and so delivered him from death. Jesus Christ is the universal mediator/mediation of salvation.

In the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus offered himself in the last supper with the sign of the bread and wine: they are transformed because of the Holy Spirit: **it is divine love that transforms**: the love with which Jesus accept in advance to give himself completely to us.

It is the divine power, the same that brought about the incarnation of the Word, which transforms, on the cross, the extreme violence and the extreme injustice of his death into **a supreme act of love and justice**.

This is the work of the Priesthood of Christ, which the Church has inherited and continue to perpetuate in the twofold forms: that of the ordinary priesthood of the baptized and that of the ordained ministers: **to transform the world with the love of God. Mediation of love**.

The Eucharist is always with us and keeps alive in our midst the priesthood of Christ and our priesthood: **TRANSFORMING EUCHARIST**.

6 Transformations or 6 steps:

1. Jesus transform his body into a gift: mature love ("This is my body which is given for you...");
2. Jesus transform violence into an act of love "sacrifice";
3. Jesus transform death into life: Resurrection;
4. Jesus transform the bread and wine into his body and blood (Eucharist);
5. Jesus transform the communicants into himself: You are the body of Christ;
6. Through the priestly vocation and mission or commitment of his followers who have become like him, Jesus transforms the world into a house of peace, the dwelling place of God.

4. PASCHAL MISSION: OUR BAPTISMAL PRIESTHOOD

§ **We are a priestly people because Christ associates us to his priesthood**. Our mediation with Jesus is, first of all, **a mediation of life**. The universal vocation to holiness finds its place in this priestly perspective. Then there is the **mediation of witness** by which we are a prophetic people. The missionary mandate flows from our being a prophetic people. Hence there comes the universal responsibility for the spreading of the Gospel.

Lastly, there is the **mediation of the secular character of our Christian vocation** (*Secularity*). By this we fulfill our call to be a kingly people and it is expressed by the universal task to bring all created realities (economy, arts, politics, etc...) to God. The prophetic and kingly dimensions are like subordinate functions of the priestly nature of the people of God.

§ *"All human life has a paschal configuration: its pattern continually moves through death to a renewed life. Paschal dimensions are characteristic of all life situations: they describe the reality of human brokenness and suffering. Especially they describe the reality of the victims of our society.*

YOU ARE NOW WAITING FOR US:

YOU ARE THE EXPECTANT MOTHER, THE VIRGIN OF OUR WAITING.

PLEASE, PUT OIL IN OUR WEAK LAMPS;

TEACH US TO WAIT PATIENTLY FOR JESUS' BIRTH WITHIN US,

AND TEACH US TO WAIT JOYOUSLY FOR JESUS' RETURN,

TO WAIT FAITHFULLY, TO WAIT SINGLE MINDEDLY EVERY DAY.

MARANA THA! COME, LORD JESUS!

THE CHURCH PLEADS YOU: COME, LORD JESUS!

WITH MARY WE PRAY: COME, LORD JESUS!

**“THERE IS NOTHING MORE POWERFUL ON EARTH THAN PURITY AND PRAYER”
(Teilhard de Chardin)**

Before we contemplate Mary being a mother at Christmas, we may fix our attention in the very being of Mary as the person who is integrated in the Advent of the Lord, because of her Immaculate Conception (God's part: GRATIA PLENA – full of grace) and her Virginité (her faith and total availability). She conceived Jesus in her heart before conceiving Jesus in her womb. She was Jesus' disciple before being Jesus' mother (St. Augustine).

The key biblical passage is the Annunciation: Luke 1:26-38. The feelings, sentiments, the attitudes of Mama Mary in the last months of her pregnancy.

INTRODUCTION

The most important person/biblical character that we find in the Advent period who can inspire us with the right and vital attitudes and dispositions in order to prepare ourselves for the coming of the Lord at Christmas is THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY.

We meet her in the liturgy of Advent first as the Immaculate Conception, then as the expectant, pregnant mother of Jesus:

The Immaculate Conception

The Miraculous Conception

These two moments in Mary's life are bearers of spiritual dispositions/attitudes that find their link in the truth (dogma) of the VIRGINITY of Mary: SEMPER VERGIN, always virgin, perpetual virginity,

before Jesus' birth, during and after. Let us remember, in this context, Teilhard de Chardin's phrase: "There is nothing more powerful on earth than purity and prayer".

MARY'S ADVENT

The fruits of our contemplation of the Immaculate Virgin Mary and of the expectant mother in her last month of pregnancy are:

1. **The spirit of Advent:** waiting for the Lord/longing for the Lord/making room for the Lord/Growing awareness that we are in the Lord-with the Lord/That we belong to the Lord: so we must own this presence of the Lord in our life in faith and radical commitment.
2. **CONSECRATION:** our religious consecration in its radicality, the Vows, especially the vow of Chastity: to belong to the Lord completely: loving the Lord God as Jesus did with single mindedness and undivided heart.
 - A. The Immaculate Conception speaks of God's initiative of Love towards Mary: AVE MARIA, GRATIA PLENA. **It is a celebration of life:** Mary comes into the world not only blessed with the gift of life, but with the fullness of God's life: Grace, without experiencing the wound of sin. This gift is a blessing for all. In Mary is pre-figured the destiny of all of us in the blessing which originates in God's universal will of salvation, redemption and sanctification.(Missionary resonance of the Immaculate Conception).
 - B. **Contemplating the love of God for Mary,** we must contemplate and relish God's love for us. Our consecration, our belonging to God (especially through the Vow of Chastity) is grace. It must become JOY.
 - My life is marked by the coming of God: Isaiah 43:1-7
 - Mary's heart fulfils all the promises of God about a new humanity: Ezekiel 11:16-21; Jeremiah 31:31-34
 - We are sealed by God: Song of Songs 8:6-7
 - C. **VIRGINITY:** Mary's virginity is her response to the fact of belonging completely to God: it is virginity of the heart first and foremost: longing for God to take possession ever more of her being. Virginity in this sense entails:
 - **Existential poverty:** we are transient like the grass (Ps 90);
 - **Total inadequacy** to the infinite gift of God: grace;
 - **Complete availability**/Total surrender/Freedom to accept and to obey God's will: Isaiah 6:1-9 ("Here I am, Lord, send me"). Hebrews 10:4-7 ("You have given me a body..."). Romans 12:1-2 ("Offer your body as spiritual sacrifice").

D. **CONSEQUENCE for our Consecration:** the joy of living, loving and caring is witnessed by a consecrated person: this is the impression I have gathered many times from the life and example of many Comboni confreres and con-sisters.

This experience of consecration becomes an experience of compassion, tenderness, joy and wonderment: contemplation!

This life of consecration/Contemplation is a life of self-giving/Going out of oneself (*Ecstasy*). It implies the cross (“Love until it hurts”; “Love until it hurts no more”). “FOR THEIR SAKE I CONSECRATE MYSELF...”(John 17).

By giving back in love the life we have experienced and perceived as a gift, joy and blessing, we are consecrated i.e. we are joined/grafted/united to Jesus, to his sacrificial death and glorious resurrection. Through the Vows of Chastity, poverty and obedience, we give back our life to God in love so that, because of him, it may be **a blessing and a joy for others**, especially the little ones.

As the beautiful life of Mary, received from the Father’s love and preserved immaculate in view of Jesus’ Paschal Mystery, for her to accomplish her destiny of divine motherhood, in the same way, our consecration, which is **the conscience of belonging to God as his exclusive possession**, SEALS our heart and our life for the service of Mission: cf. Song of Songs 8:6-7.

Beautiful commentary by John Paul II in *Redemptionis Donum*, n.8: “May the knowledge of belonging to God himself in Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of the world and Spouse of the Church, SEAL YOUR HEART, all your thoughts, words and deeds, with the sign of the biblical spouse. As you know, this intimate and profound knowledge of Christ is actuated and grows deeper day by day through the life of personal prayer, community and liturgical prayer proper to each of your religious families. **In this too, and especially so, the men and women religious who are dedicated essentially to contemplation are a powerful aid and a stimulating support for their brothers and sisters devoted to the work of the apostolate.**

May this knowledge of belonging to Christ OPEN YOUR HEART, thoughts and deeds, with the key of the mystery of the Redemption, to all the sufferings, needs and hopes of individuals and of the world... You take part, in the most complete and radical way possible, in the shaping of that “new Creation” which must emerge from the redemption of the world by means of the power of the Spirit of truth operating from the abundance of the Pascal Mystery of Christ”.

3. IMMACULATE CONCEPTION AND TENDERNESS (COMPASSION)

The fact of Consecration and the Vow of Chastity lived without compromise, should not make us hard or cold, insensitive, indifferent but the opposite: benevolent, caring, compassionate,

THE VOWS AND MISSION

- The evangelical counsels or imperatives are *conditions that Jesus puts* to those who want to be in his following or *sequela*.
- The vows by which we radically fulfill the evangelical imperatives are great means by which **we absorb Jesus' way of being and acting**. They are ways of living closer to Jesus' way of life.
- The vows are **radical sequela Christi** because they are the renunciation of realities that are good and we are naturally entitled to : to possess what is necessary for our life and is legitimately acquired, to form a family and to pursue a career. It is Jesus' radical commitment to love that the religious want to imitate.
- Jesus chose not to marry and he praised the eunuchs for the Kingdom of God. He loved single mindedly and with undivided heart his Father and us, his brethren.
- Jesus emptied himself in order to share our condition and chose to be poor to make us rich.
- Jesus came to accomplish the father's will: his food and his drink was to do the will of his Father. This will was for Jesus to save us from everlasting death, to redeem us from the slavery of sin and to unite us with God, sharing God's life as adopted sons and daughters of the Father, brothers and sisters of Jesus and temple of the Holy Spirit.
- **Jesus' example is the only real reason of the existence of Religious Life.**
- The vows represent a radical way of love at the service of Jesus' mission entrusted to the Church: **the vows have a great missionary and apostolic meaning**. The whole Church history testifies to the link

between Religious Consecration and Mission.

POVERTY

Poverty is the door to consecration and mission This is why Saint Francis of Assisi took "Lady Poverty" as his lover/wife.

Poverty proclaims that God is our only treasure. Poverty states that being is more important than having, people are more important than things and whatever we have is not ours.

Our vow of Poverty is availability to love.

Poverty means to want less and to thank more.

We must learn how to love people and to use things, not to use people and to love things.

Poverty means simplicity, hospitality and accountability.

Poverty means open-ended love and open-hearted sharing.

The greatest good that I give up with my vow of poverty is time.

AN EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE OF THE VOW OF POVERTY

1. By my vow of poverty, am I happy to share my talents, my time and my service with those who are poor and are entrusted to my care or do I do it grudgingly and negligently?
2. Do I appreciate the occasions of formation, education and growth which are given to me by the community? Am I happy with what is provided by the community in terms of food, clothing or comfort or do I easily complain?
3. Do I try to share my inner life and values with people, especially my religious family? Do I accept in faith the vulnerability of sincerity and in-depth sharing?
4. Do I affirm the giftedness of my confreres with joy or am I sad and jealous of their success? Do I know how to support and encourage them?
5. Am I generous in judging the needs of my confreres or am I inclined to be mean? Am I over-indulgent with myself?
6. Am I ready to do the little services required by the community or would I normally prefer to let the others come forward? Do I hide in time of need?
7. Am I accurate in the practice of my poverty: asking permission, giving accounts, caring for the things of the community?

CHASTITY

It is more precisely called **Vow of Celibacy**: we vow not to marry for the sake of God and his kingdom in order to be single minded in loving God and neighbor and to love with undivided heart.

The vow of chastity is Jesus' way of loving/to love as Jesus loved.

Sexuality: my condition as a consequence of my sex: masculinity or femininity. My sexuality is a source of positive energy and it is wanted by God, sacred. **Chastity** is the virtue by which I use my sexuality according to God's plan and the circumstances of my life. There is the chastity of married people, single, widows/widower, friends, religious, etc...

Love is to see and contribute/make the goodness and beauty of another person/or persons.
The **stages of love** are:

- Attraction: the emotional, sentimental, romantic side of love;
- Commitment: the decision of the will expressed in front of the community;
- The cross of Jesus: Love until it hurts and love until it hurts no more;
- Time: faithfulness/perseverance until the end/death.

AN EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE ON THE VOW OF CHASTITY

1. By my vow of chastity, am I really free to love? Do I really love, care and trust, and remain open and considerate in every situation towards my brothers in the community and the people I serve?
2. Am I open to friendship and faithful to my friends, or do I have excessive expectations and neglect the ordinary, day-to-day occasion of friendship?
3. Am I free to move to new places, new works, because I have no unbreakable link with anything or anyone but Jesus? Or do I get involved in exclusive relationships or allow others than Jesus to monopolize my heart? Am I compromising with my vow of chastity?
4. Is my heart full and at peace? Am I able to stay alone, to study and pray or am I a compulsive socializer? Do I find interest and joy in the things of God (e.g. in thinking about God, his Word, the life of the Church, people coming to God...), in prayer and in my commitment towards holiness?
5. Do I speak positively of the people I meet in my apostolate with the members of my community or do I usually criticize them, stressing their defects and shortcoming? Do I indulge in gossip about my fellow confreres or about the people entrusted to my pastoral care?
6. Am I excessively preoccupied with myself, my health, my appearance?
7. Am I able to speak about my chastity (the way I live it out and my difficulties about it) to some members of my community and to my Spiritual Director? Am I aware of what is going on in me about it?

OBEDIENCE

Obedience tells us that the passion of love by which God gave life to the world is to be welcomed and shared.

Obedience comes from the conviction that Jesus is present in human history and makes it history of salvation.

MISSION INTO THE FUTURE (2)

PARADIGM SHIFT

1. The **“paradigm shift”** represents a transformation, a change. It does not represent something absolutely new but a new way of expressing the eternal mission.
2. An important but rather exterior change is the cessation of the *IUS COMMISSIONIS* and the emerging of the *LOCAL CHURCHES* and **their missionary responsibility**. The missionary call regards all the baptized.
3. A deeper change is that **the mission of the Church is seen within the mission of God (MISSIO DEI), the mission of the Trinity**. This brings a **more positive approach** to the problem of salvation. From *EXTRA ECLESIA NULLA SALUS* (There is no salvation outside the Church) to the *UNIVERSAL SALVIFIC WILL OF GOD*.
4. The most fruitful principle is the *MISSION OF THE HOLY SPIRIT* who is present in the non-Christian traditions and religions, before the arrival of the missionary: **“the soil that you tread is holy ground”**.
5. **The proclamation of Jesus**, the Savior of all, is necessary and essential, first by our example of life, then by the preaching of the Gospel and the planting of the Church.
6. **Simple Enculturation Statement:**
 - Jesus approves and blesses whatever is good in us and in our culture;
 - Jesus rejects and condemns whatever is bad in us and in our culture;
 - Jesus gives us the fullness of life.

MISSION INTO THE FUTURE (3)

THE TRUE MISSIONARY IS THE SAINT

2 Cor 3:18 4:1-6

*“And we with our unveiled faces reflecting like mirrors the brightness of the Lord, all **grow brighter and brighter** as we are turned into the image that we reflect; this is the work of the Lord who is Spirit...*

*For it not ourselves that we are preaching, but Christ Jesus as the Lord and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. It is the same God that said, ‘Let there be light shining out of darkness’, who **has shown in our minds to radiate the light of the knowledge of God’s glory, the glory on the face of Christ”**.*

In order to shine like Jesus *the missionary* must be:

- a contemplative;
- a person of the Beatitudes;
- a witness of joy and hope.

MISSION INTO THE FUTURE (4)

HINTS FOR CONTEMPLATION AND PRAYER

1. The universal salvific will of God: A truth which should be dear to missionaries:

1 Tim 2: 1-8

Acts 10: 34-35

This is "Predestination":

- *Rom 8: 28-39*

This is the "Original Blessing":

- *Eph. 1: 3-14*

2. The Lord Jesus' amazing openness to recognize the gifts of the pagans:

- *The centurion, Mt 8:5-13 (10-11)*
- *The Canaanite woman, Mt 15:21-28*

3. Paschal Mission: Mission as com-compassion of God for the world: Jesus on the Cross is the revelation that God sides with the victims and comes to share their predicament:

- *Heb 10: 4-24*
- *Heb 12: 1-4*

All human life has a paschal configuration: its pattern continually moves through death to a renewed life. Especially it describes the reality of the victims of our society.

"We must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the Paschal Mystery" (GS 22).

We need a "crucified mind" not a "crusading mind". The Church must be a caring community of compassion. Missionaries are the forerunners of this attitude.

4. The Holy Friday Icon: the Unveiling of the Cross.

