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The Mystagogical Beauty of God. The value of creative silence

The contemplative life is a story that unfolds day by day, in the passionate search for the face of God, in a relationship of listening, closeness and encounter with Him, which transfigures life, fills it with meaning and light: in answer it requires the total donation of one's life to God and to humanity, co-operating with God in supporting the weakest.¹

The Church tirelessly — day and night — praises, thanks and pleads for all mankind. That ecclesial voice resonates especially in a “mouth” that we call “contemplative communities”. This image of the “mouth” was used by God when he said to the prophet Jeremiah: “*If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall be my mouth*” (Jer 15:19).

Such biblical sensibility leads monastic life to jealously guard this *pedagogy of beauty* that educates the world, this “*drawing what is precious and not from what is worthless*” in order to learn to perceive — in the distorted vicissitudes of adversity — the reflection of the beauty of God, the bearer of an “eternal call” to Life, which flourishes in the respect and welcome of all, that God does not cease to pronounce.²

PEDAGOGY OF BEAUTY

[cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, nn. 166-167]

Thus deep disappointment and distrust of everything has taken hold of the heart of man. For most people, without the oil of joy or bread of hope, life slips away like spilt water. Our *common home*, this land we step on, keeps the doors and windows closed to the light of Life.

The question about evil emerges daily in silence and on the lips of everyone, and in the face of the human lament that continues to ask: “What beauty will save the world?”³ monastic life responds — more by “being among men” than by words. Only God's merciful beauty saves man from the emptiness of his life, only God knows the infinite suffering of the world, which he embraces and transforms into good for all; only through Christ's suffering does God break into history — and into our everyday routine — to overcome evil with his merciful Love, and raise man overcome by difficulties.⁴

God does not forget man; this is the beauty that saves. The monastic community's ceaseless appeal for mankind, especially for those who suffer the most, manifests God's eternal interest in humanity, created by his own hands. Descartes' affirmation is inadequate: “I think, therefore I am”.

What could be more existential and necessary to the human being than to know that: “Someone is thinking of me [loves me], then I exist”, and it is this reality that the coenobite makes present.

Cultivate this present, reflective gaze that goes beyond what is seen and the banality/bulimia of ephemeral contacts, learn to draw beauty from dross, because this is urgent in our world, and monastic life is dedicated entirely to this, in order to respond to the activist spiral of a world — apparently in fiesta — but with the lamp of joy extinguished for lack of true fraternity.

Our houses and districts, instead of being beautiful meeting places where “solidarity” is appreciated and sustained, often turn into “places of isolation and mutual distrust... more often built — to isolate and protect — than to *connect and integrate*” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 75).

The monastery, in the midst of this reality is not passive, is a voice that educates in silence, revealing to man his need to connect “from the heart” to his origin, to God the source of life, in order to develop as a human being, knowing from where he comes and where he is going, and not becoming a programmed and efficient computer.

The monastic community is not isolated from the world, nor is it called to withdraw into itself; “what the Holy Spirit continually mobilizes is not an unruly activism, but above all a ‘loving attentiveness, ... a true concern’”, for the other (EG, n. 199), in a continuous exodus from self. The beauty of being barefoot before the other, detached from one’s ego, with an exquisite readiness to listen and offer hospitality, first to the brothers or sisters of the community, then — both in the liturgy as in welcoming guests — to all, is part of the pedagogy of beauty in the silence of the cloister.⁵

Only in communion with God does man encounter a “stable life”. But for this he needs a “sincere closeness”, an interpersonal relationship that reveals God and his indissoluble “bond” to Him from the origin of the world. The monastic community is this “human warmth” that reveals the truth of God’s existence and his love for man.⁶ Naturally, from this derives prayerful beauty and the melody of God.⁷

PRAYER MINISTRY

Humanity has buried the voice of God, Etty Hillesum wrote in her diary with great perception: “Within me there is a very deep source. And in this source is God. Sometimes I reach it, but more often it is covered with stones and sand: at those times, God is buried, so it is necessary to dig him out again”.⁸

This is the service *opus Dei* performs — the monastic liturgy — through the *lectio divina* in the hermitage: to free the soul from the land of things, from the mud of sin, from the arena of banality, from the nettles of rivalry and position, the weeds of gossip and endless complaints, first in one’s own monastic community, then in the lives of all those who come athirst for this “voice of God” which they do not know how to find.

Wake up to life like children: Liturgy of the Hours

The Liturgy of the Hours in the monastery is one of the many ways to unearth the voice of God that guides and sustains us in life, which we have weakened.

To pray is an art of beauty and inner liberation. In the Christian monastery, the one in prayer is in “search of God”, whose pole star to “live praying” is the Bible, and especially the Psalter.⁹ The Psalms — which make up the monastic liturgy — are those endearing human words, recited for centuries, that bear the seal of God, his divine inspiration, and initiate us to prayer, that “golden knot” that keeps all things unified in those who let themselves be guided as a small child.

If we watch children *at play* we notice that it has no purpose, it is totally free and therefore liberating. The liturgy too, – in another context — like the children's *game*, lets us enter a *free*, liberating *space*, far from the onerous daily routine, and therefore healing.¹⁰ Indeed *games* serve as *an introduction to life*, and in that sense the liturgy is a preparatory exercise, an initiation to the true life, life in the freedom and immediacy of God and in openness to one another.¹¹

The monastic *liturgy* awakens us to true life, like children exempt from complications before a very simple God, and open to that promised greatness, which is not completely fulfilled in this life; nevertheless we enjoy its first-fruits on this earth. God breaks into the liturgical assembly, breaks the bonds of the ‘old’ man, and shows him a new horizon. Song is thus a “much higher” form of preaching, it epitomizes the love of God that liberates and heals, and its beauty mystagogically introduces — all who join in — to the Real Presence of God in our routine duties.¹²

Roll the tombstone away: Lectio divina

Around us, many of our brothers live under the sign of death, as orphans, crushed by the weight of suffering, and with the very same question as that in the heart of the women of the

Gospel in the early hours of Saturday: “Who will roll away the stone for us from the door of the tomb?” (cf. Mk 16:3).

In the simple exercise of *lectio divina*, which many monasteries offer to the laity, the monastic community “rolls the stone away from the tomb” with the power of the Word of God read, prayed, contemplated and shared in *collatio*.¹³

The expression “roll the stone from the mouth of the well” is unique in the Old Testament, although repeated three times, it only appears in Jacob and Rachel’s first encounter at the well, (cf. Gen 29:3.8.10), the traditional place of weddings, when Jacob watered Rachel’s little flock. She was amazed, the narrative says, and “she ran and told her father” (cf. Gen 29:10, 12).¹⁴ The word “to roll away the stone” and “to water the flock” are synonymous in the Bible. Later in history, the women at the sepulchre were also amazed to see that the stone had been rolled away and ran to report it; somehow they quenched their thirst and watered the “little flock” of Jesus.¹⁵

Lectio divina is this well that quenches the thirst of many people, and its praxis — offered to those who approach the monastery — is an exercise to relieve the burden weighing on many dejected and disoriented lives. Now for the Jewish people, ‘digging wells’ where pagans were was to open them to the Word of God (cf. GnR, 70). To roll the stone away means to open the multiple meanings of the biblical text, and to use them to illuminate peoples’ lives darkened by meaninglessness and emptiness. Thus *lectio divina* becomes to experience the strength of Jacob, and a proclamation of the Resurrection of Jesus implies to become involved in it with an existential response, since we are all “*responsorial beings*”.

BEING RESPONSORIAL

The human being is summoned. God calls him to communion from the beginning when he said: “*Adam, where are you?*” (cf. Gn 3:9), and this call has continued to resonate in every corner of history with the Lord’s beautiful invitation: “O Israel, give heed!” (cf. Dt 4:1, 6). Still today, he tirelessly awaits a full response to the ever new appeal: “*Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him...*” (Rev 3:20).

There is, therefore, a perennial dialogue between heaven and earth, since God seeks man to establish and ratify his covenant of love with him as the beginning of a happy world, as well as to respond to his most essential human needs.¹⁶

This reality echoes in monastic life, that — as a “responsorial life” — responds to the person’s constitutive needs of ‘being’, and this through the experience of the monastic vows of obedience, stability and conversion of mores [*conversado morum*].

The need not to flee — neither from oneself nor from adversity — that the *stability* vow expresses, the need to be open to change — expressed in the vow of the *conversion of mores* — and the need to listen — expressed in the vow of obedience — respond to the man of today who is in search of true freedom but in the wrong way.¹⁷

Stability leads us to live not as a roving “landloper”,¹⁸ because every person needs to feel rooted to grow, put down roots, in order to know to whom he belongs and not walk through life aimlessly. This *stability* requires firmness, resistance, patience and willingness to accept suffering, until you acquire a *stable heart*.

The essential counterpoint to stay faithful — which *stability* expresses — is to advance constantly — until one reaches *conversado morum* — i.e., to live in continuous conversion. It is the so-called vote ready to respond to the novelties that God presents throughout life, as opposed to comfort and safe choice of in my own plans and mediocrity. It is a commitment to be totally transformed into a ‘new man’, always dying to the ‘old man’ and his protests. This is a primary need of every person, because life is a succession of small deaths that mark stages and growth.

And *obedience* is listening and acting according to what is heard.¹⁹ The first word of the Rule of St. Benedict is: “Listen son”, *obsculta o fili*, which is not simply to hear, but to hear the slightest sound, like one intent on counting the heartbeat. To obey is, therefore, to pay careful attention in order to respond, so obedience emanates from love; is to love listening. Obedience

comes from the heart in monastic life, and is an expression of free, humble and loving surrender to the will of God that gives inner freedom.

CONCLUSION

We can, therefore, conclude that our way of life, shaped by these vows, is how we take part in the construction of a more human world, and therefore more evangelized. It is an eloquent announcement of the existence of God who realizes all this life in us, makes us into responsorial beings, and into communities that roll the stone away from the tomb of humanity, it brightens our existence of little ones ready to work for God, and transforms the solitude of the cloister into the harbinger of creative silence.

Thus, without words, the monastic life proclaims the Gospel of the Kingdom, which being small — like a little leaven — is invincible. It has the power to work the dough and raise the mass to become a world happy in God; offers a “closer look” to contemplate, be moved and gives the world a healing rhythm of “proximity” — as Pope Francis invites us — that frees people from the isolation and abandonment in which many live.

Listening and understanding — drawn from the heart and prayer — encourage one’s neighbour to arise and set out on a new journey. The monastery thus becomes a “home” to which an orphan and neglected generation can always return. We are not “distant spectators” of life, but we are involved in history to make present the fragrance of Jesus’ presence close to men, as he promised us: “*I am with you always, to the close of the age*” (Mt 28:20).

FOOTNOTES:—

Cf. Bl. Paul VI, Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, On The Church in the Modern World, 7 December 1965. “*It is, however, only in freedom that man can turn himself towards what is good. The people of our time prize freedom very highly and strive eagerly for it. In this they are right. Yet they often cherish it improperly, as if it gave them leave to do anything they like, even when it is evil. But what is truly freedom is an exceptional sign of the image of God in man. For God willed that man should ‘be left in the hand of his own counsel’ so that he might of his own accord seek his Creator and freely attain his full and blessed perfection by cleaving to him. Man’s dignity therefore requires him to act out of conscious and free choice, as moved and drawn in a personal way from within and not by blind impulse or by mere external constraint. Man gains such dignity when, ridding himself of all slavery to the passions, he presses forward towards his goal by freely choosing what is good...*” (n.17).

Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, Instruction, *The Service of Authority and Obedience*, (11 May 2008, n. 31), *follow the sign of beauty* (Vatican City, 15 October 2015), n. 52.

Dostoevskij, F., *The idiot*.

Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*. “*It is in regard to death that man’s condition is most shrouded in doubt. Man is tormented not only by pain and the gradual break-up of his body.... Because he bears in himself the seed of eternity, which cannot be reduced to mere matter, he rebels against death. All the aids made available by technology, however useful they may be, cannot set his mind at rest. They may prolong his life-span; but this does not satisfy his heart-felt longing, one that can never be stifled, for a life to come. While the mind is at a loss before the mystery of death, the Church, taught by divine Revelation, declares that God has created man in view of a blessed eternity that lies beyond the limits of his sad state on earth....*” (n.18).

Cf. Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, *The joy of the Gospel*, (Rome, 24 November 2013, n. 167; Bergoglio, “*Educate: need and passion*”, Claretians publication, Madrid 2014.

Ruiz Martorell, J. *Adam and Eve: the drama of being human*, in Alegre Aragües, J. Alonso Schökel, L., *et al....* The author reminds us that in the Bible the voice of God reveals the truth of man, and presents Creation not only as breathing life into a human being, but as situating him in an

interpersonal relationship. At that point creation reached completion and a hymn of jubilation is raised as an epilogue: “*This at last is bone of my bone ...*” (Gn 2:23).

The exhortation to “prefer nothing to the *opus Dei*”, (Benedict, *Rule*, 43:3), “lest anything obstruct, divert, or interrupt your ministry of prayer. In this way, through contemplation you will become ever more fully an image of Christ and your communities will become true schools of prayer” (Apostolic Constitution *Vultum Dei Quaerere*, n.17; *Seeking the Face of God*, (22.VII.2016).

Hillesum, E. *Diary of Etty Hillesum: a life Una vida conmovida*, Anthropos, Barcelona 2007. She wrote this in her diary months before her death in the gas chamber at Auschwitz on 30 November 1943.

Cf. *Vultum Dei Quaerere*, nn. 36-37, which concern the witness of the nuns of today. ‘*Monasteries are to pay special attention to vocational and spiritual discernment, ensuring that candidates receive personalized guidance, and to provide appropriate programmes of formation*’ (n. 36, §3:1, 5)... “*May your communities become true schools of contemplation and prayer. The world and the Church need you.... This should be your prophetic witness*” (I, 36). “*In a culture paradoxically suffering from anonymity and at the same time obsessed with the details of other people’s lives, shamelessly given over to morbid curiosity*”, (*Evangelii Gaudium*, n.169).

Huizinga, J., *Homo luden*. Alianza Editorial, Madrid 2000; Guardini, R., *El espíritu de la liturgia/The Spirit and the Liturgy*, Centro de Pastoral Litúrgica, Barcelona, 2000.

Ratzinger, J., *El espíritu de la liturgia. An introduction*, Cristiandad, Madrid 2002. 34. *Ibid.*, *op cit*, pp. 171-172.

Avellaneda Ruiz, P., *Unción y Banquete. Encuentros con la belleza de Dios*, Colección Estudios y Ensayos, p. 198, BAC, Madrid, 2016.

Vidal, M., *Un judío llamado Jesús. Lectura del Evangelio a la luz de la Torah*, Biblioteca Mercabá. Ediciones EGA, Bilbao, 1997, p.74 f.

Avellaneda Ruiz, P., *El tesoro escondido en la Escritura*, Biblioteca Cisterciense 35, Monte Carmelo, Burgos, 2011, pp. 131-137.

Di Sante, C., *El Padre Nuestro. La experiencia de Dios en la tradición judeo-cristiana*, Colección Ágape 18. Secretariado Trinitario, Salamanca, 1998, pp. 102-103. In the Bible the good world does not originate from an organic or naturalistic principle, according to C. di Sante, but from a *dialogical principle* that is the foundation of creation and of being, which creates an interpersonal relationship between God and man, and man with his fellows and with the whole of creation.

De Waal, E., *Buscando a Dios, Sigúeme*, Salamanca 2006, p. 59 f.

Cf. *Rule of St Benedict*, 1, 10-12.

It derives from the Latin *oboedire*, therefore *audire* means to listen.

(Ref: *Vida Religiosa — Monograph*, 2/2017, vol. 122, pp. 61-74).