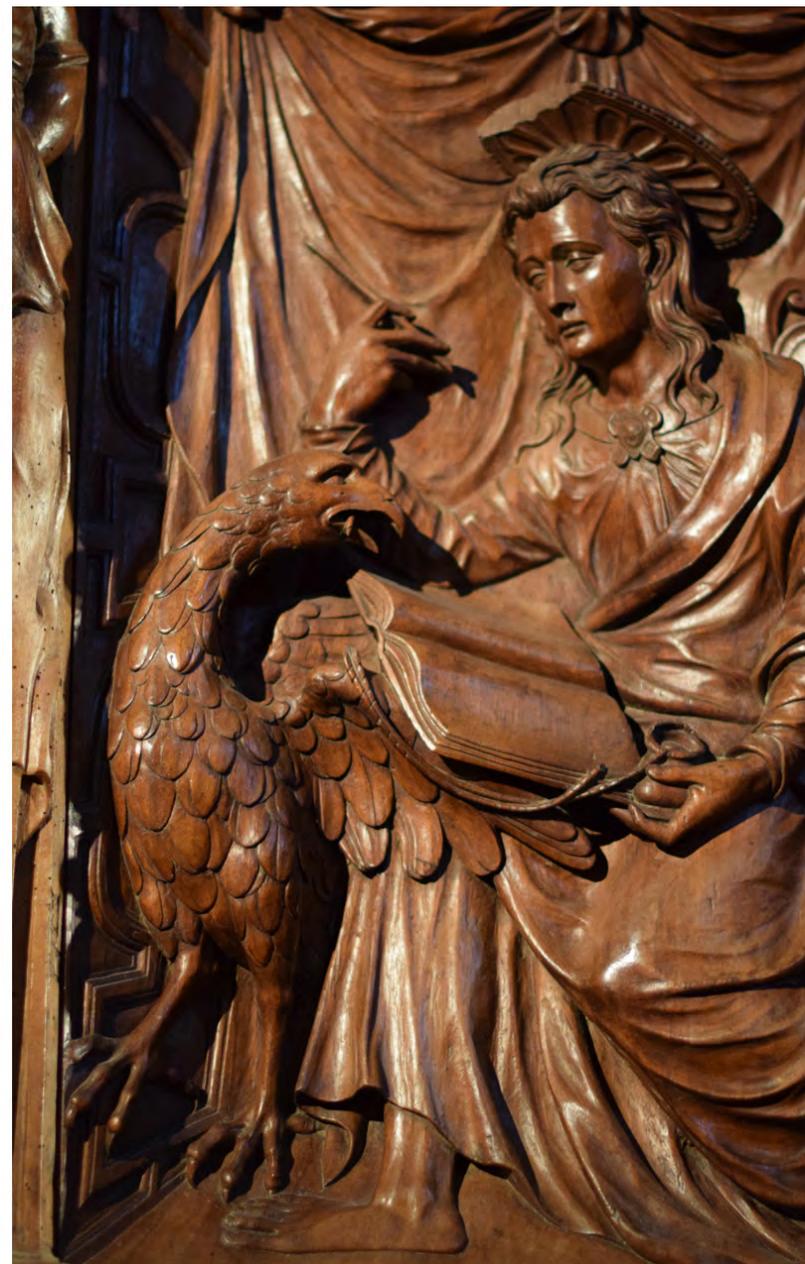


Permanent formation program

2015 Agustinian interiority

2. The Word, journey to interior life





**CONVERT AND BELIEVE (CF. Mk. 1:15).
THE WORD, JOURNEY TO INTERIOR LIFE**

BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION...

You made us for yourself, O Lord,
and our heart is restless until it rests in you (*Confessions*. 1,1,1)..

This statement by our spiritual father Augustine, now well-known and repeated throughout all generations, could well resume the foundation set for the Christian interior life since the time of the Fathers of the Church until our own time. In such a vision, the interior life expresses the desire of the supreme good (*bonum*) which resides in man, and is understood as a movement of the heart towards the infinite, the eternal, the absolute.

In this same line of thought at the beginning of the last century Miguel de Unamuno responded to a young man who written to him asking him for advice:

You tell me in your letter that up until now your motto has been Forwards! And that now it will be Upwards! Leave aside this forward and backwards, upwards and downwards; stop playing with progressiveness and anarchism...leave it to the progressivists, the retrogrades, to the risers and the fallers, to those who move only in the outer world, and look for the other interior space, that of your soul. Fight in order to place in it the whole universe, which is the best way to pour yourself into it...Instead of saying: Forwards! Or Upwards! say: Within! Re-concentrate yourself in order to irradiate outwards. Let yourself be filled in order to later overflow, conserving the inner fount. Gather yourself in order to best give yourself to others, entirely and without division. The generous man says "I give what I have". The hero says "I give what I am". "I give myself", says the saint; say with him in your giving "I give myself to the whole universe". For this you have to make yourself universal, searching within yourself. Within!

It is also necessary to remember our *Constitutions* number 12 which remind us about the way to the inner life:

Essentially, recollection is an active process, through which man dispersed and scattered by the wound of sin, yet moved by grace, enters into himself where God is already waiting for him. Thus he is illuminated by Christ, the inner master, without whom none are taught or illuminated; he transcends himself and is renewed according to the image of the new man which is Christ, and is calmed by the contemplation of the Truth.

The inner life is, without a doubt, a return to ourselves and with this we are talking implicitly about a return to God. It is a return to enjoy feeling like creatures. It is to be creation, to return to breathe the vital breath of God the creator who imprints within us his Triune image (cf. Gn. 1:26; 2:7). In accepting this spiritual life is in play, our inner life, and in real terms death and life are put into play.

To receive God's breath (אלהים רוח) is to reject mere appearance and the foolishness of things which make life too worldly. Instead we opt for a creative life, an intelligent life, a life of freedom, which is the goal for which we were made. We are neither slaves nor sons of slaves. We are free sons of a Father who sets us free and of a brother, Jesus, who paid the price of our condemnation with his blood so that we would no longer live like prisoners (cf. 1Cor 7:23).

It is for this reason that in the interior life we find in ourselves that which is the most genuine and original of every person, and in this originality we will be

returning to the same origin of every person, which is God. It will be to acknowledge from where we have come and where we are destined to go.

“Teach us to number our days and we will acquire a wiser heart” (Ps. 90:12): this is the prayer which the psalter applies to Moses, the “man of God” (cf. Ps. 90:1). It is fruit of his peculiar and extraordinary religious experience, and at the same time, expression of the common desire of all men to acquire a divine wisdom as an authentic way of life. Man, in fact, with his inner search can reflect upon his condition as a historical being. But only God can teach him to give the right sense to his life conducting himself in this sense, from illumination, as the seed of an intelligent conduct which is good and bears much fruit¹.

Man is the way towards God. This has been said by all philosophies and religions. Christianity adds: God is the way towards man. God has opened up a path in history which man has forged, in order to arrive to where He is². These pages have the aim of giving us some lights for the journey.



¹ Cf. P. Bovati, *I giorni di Dio*, Milano 2013, 7.

² Cf. O. González de Cardedal, *La entraña del cristianismo*, (*The depths of Christianity*), Secretariado Trinitario, Salamanca 2001, p. 323.

CONVERSION AND THE INNER LIFE. PROPHETIC LIFE

In the Old Testament, the life of the Spirit is intimately associated with prophecies. The prophets were people moved and motivated by the Spirit more than anyone else. In the Bible, to be moved by the Spirit and being a prophet is practically the same thing. So much so that when we want to identify the Spirit in whom we believe we say “We believe in the Holy Spirit, who spoke through the prophets” (Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed).

Before Christ, this Spirit was only given to a few people, but in Pentecost God’s Spirit is poured out upon many and becomes accessible to everyone. The immediate result is that everyone can now be like the prophets and can share in the Spirit of the prophets in one way or another. As Peter tells us in Acts 2:15-21 the prophecy of Joel 3:1-5 is now realized:

It will come to pass in the last days, says the Lord: ‘I will pour out my Spirit on all men. Their sons and daughters will make prophecy, the young will have visions and the old will have dreams.

“To have visions” and “have dreams”, are metaphorical ways of referring to the activity of the prophets.

The distinctive mark of these men was to make known God’s will when the people were putting their interests in things which were not of God; that is in idols. It is for this reason that when we are asked to live a prophetic religious life first of all we should understand this as a life separated from idols and filled with God. In order for this to happen we need a life of continuous conversion, of continually returning to our source, or rather the Source.

The concept of conversion in the Bible is particularly difficult to understand, because of the numerous meanings associated with the term. They are an indication of the convergence which happened between different religious groups at that time. This difficulty was increased by the fact that certain realities associated with this concept in biblical texts cannot be brought together in one singular idea. The verb *shub* (שׁוּב) means most prominently *to go back, return*.

This is connected with its root meaning which also means to respond and makes of conversion a continually renewed return to the Lord. In the end it is a concept which is always about changing direction. What the word wants to tell us is of the *radical necessity*, given that for Jesus the word *μετάνοια* defines the very essence of Christianity (cf. Mc. 1:15)³.

It is necessary to understand conversion in order to come to the centre of the interior life; that is, the intimate and transforming encounter of the heart by God. It is necessary to be reconciled, with ourselves and with God. To return we need a starting point. The experience of the Israelite people and their journey throughout history is, without a doubt, that of a going away from and a coming back to the Lord. The Hebrew *shub* is a return to the source of their very own lives, and their inner lives. It is a return to the waters of life.

For my people have committed two barbarities: they have abandoned me, the fount of living water, in order to excavate cisterns; cisterns which are cracked and do not hold water (Jer. 2:13).

The going away is the first of the acts which allows return, reconciliation and inner life. We have to come to understand firstly our dispersion in order to return to our inner life. Change, confession, recognizing one's own faults and returning to the God whom we abandoned are no small thing. But rather they are about bringing about change in our most intimate being. It is a return which is easily understood superficially but difficult to carry out:

For this reason, house of Israel, I will judge each one of you according to your own actions – says the Lord. Be converted (שובו) and apart yourselves (יבושה) from all your rebelliousness, so that nothing can make you fall into sin. Throw far away from yourselves all the evil acts that you have committed against me and let us make a new heart (לב חדש) and a new spirit (רוח חדשה). Why do you wish to die house of Israel? I do not desire the death of any man – thus says the Lord. Convert yourselves (יבושה), therefore and you will live (Ez. 18:30-32).

³ Cf. E. Bianchi, *Lessico della vita interiore*, Rizzoli 2004, 29.

The message of all the prophets has the same structure. There is a call to “metanoia” μετάνοια נחש (repentance, conversion, transformation), as a warning about the judgment which will come if people do not change, and a promise of salvation if people really do change. The future judgment or promised salvation is not absolutely inevitable. It is restricted by conditional clauses: “if you don’t change”, “if you do change”. In other words what the prophets foresee are the consequences of that which is or is not being done now. They foresee the future in the present; which is a current tendency in the signs of the times.

The prophets divert the attention of the people, from the past towards the future. Instead of trying to understand the present in terms of past events (Exodus, Sinai, David etc.), they ask the people to understand the present in terms of God’s future action. The prophets were focused on the future, giving advice about the future; they were “progressive”.

They wanted the people to change, to plan, to act, taking as a reference the future. This future knowledge or ἔσχατον would be a radically new knowledge, and for this they asked the people to do new things, to realize changes as yet unheard of.

It is important that we take note of the number of times that the prophets use the word “new” נחש: a new pact, a new time, a new heart, a renewed spirit, a new heaven and a new earth, a New Jerusalem, or simply that God would do new things. They encouraged the people to break with the past and look towards the newness of God’s promises.

The prophet was a practical man, and for this reason his inner life and his spirituality were lived in a manner of confrontation and change. It is a break with the merely exterior. It is the announcement of a new life that is not born of mere social responsibility or of an emptiness that pushes them to give themselves for others in exchange for spiritual well-being.

A life in the Spirit is a life which denounces that which is erroneous in our world, in our society, in our Church and community. It is to talk openly about the future towards which we are travelling, or should be travelling, and to say what

God should feel in relation to the events of our times. This is, at least, the way which we should be travelling if we want to be faithful to the Spirit of the prophets, which is God's Spirit.



AN INNER JOURNEY

We have always been told that consecrated life is a way of following Christ “more closely”, a term which I personally don’t believe is very precise because closeness and being far away from are measures which if we don’t have a fixed point we may never know when it is finished. But that is not a reason for discrediting that which has been handed on to us. The call to be closer is only understood by living the same life as Christ, which is at the same time a common call to all the baptized. For this reason it is necessary to probe the New Testament and see what is the interior journey which Jesus proposes; a journey of forgiveness and reconciliation, of searching and encounter.

Jesus belonged to a group of people who had a very profound spiritual life burning in their hearts. They were people who prayed, and knew how to pray. The practice of prayer in Israel, in its interior life, was a guide which shaped their very faith.

It is of huge importance the profound spiritual life carried out by the Lord. In his public ministry he *retired* frequently, above all during the night or at sunset, to *desert places, apart, by himself, on the mountain* (cf. Mt. 14:23; Mk. 1:35; 6:46; Lk. 5:16; 9:18.28); and in particular *he went by himself to the mount of Olives* (cf. Lk. 22:39).

Luke is the evangelist who most insists on the inner life, on the life of profound prayer and meeting with the Father which Jesus carried out; and he connects it to important moments in his life and mission. We could highlight some key moments in his spiritual life: John’s baptism (cf. Lk. 3:21-22); the election of the twelve (cf. Lk. 6:12-13); the transfiguration - an act which is profoundly tied to prayer (cf. Lk. 9:28-29); prayer as a space for Peter’s confession (cf. Lk. 9:18). From his meeting with the Father is born the teaching on prayer directed towards the disciples (cf. Lk. 11:1-4); before the passion he declares that he has prayed for Peter, so that he might not fail (cf. Lk. 22:32); and lastly, Jesus on the cross prays

pleading forgiveness for his executioners (cf. Lk. 23:34), and afterwards hands over in trust his last breath into his father's hands (cf. Lk. 23:46; Ps. 31:6)⁴.

The New Testament invites us to make this teaching of Jesus for those first disciples something personal, being the disciples of this moment in history so that we can know how to make the journey and put our feet on the right track.

It is important to understand that this process of inner life, like everything in human life, is a journey which is only travelled one step at a time. It would be useless to reach the end in only one movement, for two principal reasons: first is the impossibility of undertaking any journey in a single bound; and secondly and most importantly there is the learning experience which must be made along every step of the path of the road to be travelled.

It is for this reason that a series of steps will be proposed which allow us to make a continuous pilgrimage throughout life, and which tell us what steps to take in order to be always able to retake that route; because for many reasons as learners on the pilgrimage we often get lost.

First step

If anyone has something against someone *forgive them*, and the heavenly Father will also forgive their faults (Mk. 11:25).

This passage from Mark is found at the end of the passage in which the disciples are surprised to see that the fig tree had withered, and that the power of faith is capable of moving mountains. Faith was an important theme for the evangelist, and he used a small collection of sayings as a contrast in the passage of the fig tree and the temple; both related with the judgment which is closing in on Israel. With God's judgment only the faith which abandons itself completely to God can stand firm. The community has to again and again to rejuvenate their faith in common prayer, which fills them with confidence.

But it is necessary that the community doesn't only think about God, but also about Jesus. It was he who opened for them this new filial relationship with the

⁴ Cf. E. Bianchi, *Por qué orar, cómo ora (Why to pray, how to pray)*, Sal Terrae, Santander 2010, 54.

Father and with each other and anyone who may or not have something do with the community. God requires that we forgive them, and he requires it by his own act of forgiveness. Thus, the existence of reconciliation is an overriding law for the Christian community⁵.

Verse 25 has its clearest form in Matthew 6:14⁶. This passage underlines that he who prays depends on God's forgiveness (cf. Ecclesiasticus 28:2). The previous condition for God's forgiveness is the willingness for us to be reconciled with others. With this two things appear clear: first, that prayer can be abused when we are angry; second, our relationship with God always includes a relationship with others. Prayer life is completely sterile when our relationship with our neighbour or brother is distorted. This rule is of prime importance in our meetings in community.

It is worth taking into account that only in this place in Mark's Gospel does he talk of *Our Father who is in Heaven*. In prayer the disciple must experience God as a Father. Given that the evangelist favours the word Son, we can see the appearance of the father figure as something inherent in the filial relationship with Jesus⁷.

To be guardians of our brothers in the faith and of all men is an essential condition in order to gain access to communion with the Trinity. The reconciliation with our brother and a love which is extended even to our enemies includes the willingness to do good to those who do evil to us (cf. Lk. 6:27). It is this attitude which should accompany the beginning of all dialogue with the Lord, for forgetting this fact impoverishes our inner life and our searching even up to the point of making it banal.

⁵ Cf. J. Gnilka, *El evangelio según san Marcos. II. Mc 8,27-16,20*, (*The Gospel According to Saint Mark, II, Mk 8:27 – 16:20*) Sígueme, Salamanca 2001, 160.

⁶ V. 26 which some manuscripts (Koiné Θ) offer partially with some variants (D lat), should be eradicated from the text. It says: "If you do not forgive, your Father in heaven will not forgive your transgressions". The beginning of the v. is explained by the influence of a parallel v. in Mt. 6:14 ss.

⁷ Cf. J. Gnilka, *El evangelio...* 159.

God loved us even when we were his enemies, so how can we expect to enter into dialogue with him who we do not see, if we do not know how to forgive or wish to communicate with the brother whom we do see (cf. 1Jn 4:20)?

Second step

Go back to your room, close the door and pray to your father who sees that which occurs in secret (Mt. 6:6).

We are called to live our faith in community, and we express it in the liturgy, in prayer with the whole Church, praying together with all our brothers, making of this common gathering together the best kind of school for finding God personally.

But this is not enough. It needs to be taken in, together with the free gift of grace of the one who talks face to face with God when others are not physically present. To look for God in solitude, aside, is not a form of individualism but rather the search for God as sons in the secret of the heart. Also of accepting on us that penetrating look from the God who knows, looks and talks to every one of us in an unrepeatable and unique way⁸.

Jesus's invitation to enter into our rooms and close the doors is not only a remedy to the hypocrisy of one who wishes to be seen and admired by others (cf. Mt. 6:5) but rather it indicates a way of having a loving and intimate dialogue with God, "face to face" with the invisible one. It is the time to direct oneself to God freely, to receive in the passing of time his presence, to perceive how he approaches, how he is at the door and calls to us (cf. Ap. 3:20).

To be nourished merely on the common place means that we run the risk of making this an experience of belonging only to a group, like a kind of exhibition for others. This personal encounter, today the most neglected, can lead to long-term problems for communal coming together particularly in the sense of not

⁸ "The section on prayer, vv. 5–15, rejects praying in public places with the intent to be seen by others and then goes on to spurn long-winded or repetitious prayer (cf. Eccles 5:2; Matthew's 'do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do' is consistent with his audience being largely Jewish Christians). There follows the Lord's Prayer, a model of brevity. Although Christian tradition has usually understood the prayer as having to do with everyday needs, much is to be said for interpreting it as an eschatological prayer" (J. Muddiman and J. Darton, *The Gospels: The Oxford Bible Commentary*, Oxford 2001, 42).

being clear about the truth⁹. Whilst pastorally many efforts are dedicated in catechesis to an encounter with God by means of the liturgy, regrettably they are not supported by an adequate transmission of personal encounter which should start from infants. The words of Martin Buber are right: “If believing in God means talking *about* him in the third person, then I don’t believe in God. But if to believe in him means to talk *to* him, then I do believe in God”¹⁰.

Third step

I will do all that is asked in my name, so that the Father may be glorified (Jn. 4:13).

This passage is found in Jesus’ so-called last dialogue. The introduction to this, Jn. 13:31-38, ushered in the theme of Jesus’ departure. The final part of the discourse is dedicated to giving an answer to unexpected problems which may arise.

Jn. 14 starts with the note of certainty that the disciples will not be separated from Jesus, because he will return and take them with him (v.). The Father and Jesus himself will respond to their pleas (vs. 12-13), and the Holy Spirit will come thus prolonging Jesus’s presence (vs. 16-17 and 26). Jesus himself will be with them (v. 18) as will the Father (v. 23)¹¹.

Because of his departure, the disciples are going to carry out a mission which Jesus does not hesitate in identifying with his own. Reading the text carefully we sense that the believer will not just do the works which Jesus *did*, but rather those which Jesus *is doing* (τὰ ἔργα ἃ ἐγὼ ποιῶ: the works which I *am doing*)¹².

In vs. 13 to 14 the Synoptic tradition of prayer always being heard¹³ is put alongside what Jesus previously proclaimed. The disciples’ plea is addressed to

⁹ Cf. E. Bianchi, *Por qué orar...* 58.

¹⁰ Cited by P. Vermes, *Buber on God and the Perfect Man*, Littman Library Of Jewish Civilization, London 1988, 137.

¹¹ Cf. R. E. Brown, *El evangelio según san Juan (The Gospel according to John)*, Cristiandad, Madrid 2000, 945.

¹² Cf. X. Léon-Dufour, *Lectura del evangelio de Juan (Jn. 13-17)*, III, (*Reading John’s Gospel*) Sígueme, Salamanca 1995, 91.

¹³ Cf. Mk. 11:22-24//Mt. 21:21ss; Mt. 17:20//Lk. 17:6; Mt. 18:19.

the Father, who is certainly not indifferent; rather there is a divine plan at place in the world in which believers are already taking part.

It is important to take this step in our inner life. We must harmonize our life with that of Jesus, bringing them together. Looking for the Father in Jesus' name, although disconcerting, is to already have found him. Having put the will of God above all other things his will is realized in us and in his heavenly and earthly creatures. It was putting God first which characterized Jesus's whole life, and was his daily bread.

We must believe that we are listened to and accompanied in our search, for anything is possible for those who have faith (Mk. 9:23; 11:24, 1Jn. 5:14-15). On the other hand, those who on entering into their hearts show themselves to be undecided on whether to trust or be sceptical are not acknowledging the God who is close to them, nor the Jesus Christ who possesses the power to realize infinitely more than we could ever ask or think of (cf. Eph. 3:20).

Fourth step

The publican, keeping himself at a distance, didn't even try to raise his eyes to heaven, but rather beat his breast saying: Lord, have mercy on me for I am a sinner (Lk. 18:13).

The Publican's humble attitude is the key in this step towards a renewed interior life. In his prayer, which is a thanksgiving, the Pharisee parades his virtues, which he displays with an air of complacency; first negatively and then in positive tones. He is not like other men: he is not a thief, he is not unjust, nor adulterous, he is not even "like this tax collector" (v. 11). He keeps his fasts and pays his tithes, even beyond what is written (v. 12).

The tax collector, instead, doesn't dare to come near nor lift up his eyes to heaven. He doesn't give thanks, but rather pleas for mercy, beating his breast and whispering "I am a sinner" (v.13). There, precisely in the confession of his sin, is where the tax collector becomes a just man; for the condition of being "just" is exactly what the Pharisee hoped for with his rejection of robbery, adultery,

iniquity and his observance of fasting and tithing. The conduct of the Pharisee and his legalistic attitude prove to be misplaced, even though in his social conduct he had never been compromised by being as miserable as that of a tax collector.

This parable shows the thinking of Jesus on this tireless search for self-justice. True moral rectitude, in its religious dimension, is not obtained by self-complacency in our own achievements or through a vain trust in our own possibilities. Neither is it the rejection of that which is prohibited nor the observance of commandments —be they Moses' laws or the ridiculous prescriptions of the Pharisees— for “justification” can only really come from God's mercy¹⁴.

In Luke's Gospel, the model of interior disposition is that of the Publican: the justified sinner who presents himself before God in the only attitude that can bring about humility. Peter is the first disciple to be forgiven, already from the time of his vocation when recognizing Jesus as the Lord cries out: “Stay away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man” (Lk. 5:8).

The relationship between God and man in the inner life should be situated in the intimate truth of the main characters of such an encounter: the Creator and the creature, the prodigal father of love and the son lost and found, the Doctor and the sick, the Holy one and the sinner.

Fifth step

I also promise you that if two of you come together on earth to ask something of my Father who is in Heaven it will be given to them. For where there are two or three gathered in my name, I am there present among them (Mt. 18:19-20).

We are in the section in which Matthew connects fraternal correction with the life of common prayer (18:15-20). Although in v.19 we seem to start a new theme, it is syntactically linked through the introductory conditional clause (ἐάν) with vv. 15-17, through the opposition “on earth – in heaven” (ἐπι τῆς γῆς - ἐν οὐρανοῖς), with v.18.

¹⁴ Cf. J. Fitzmyer, *El evangelio según san Lucas (8,22-18,14.)* III, (*Luke's Gospel*), Cristiandad, Madrid 1986, 856-867.

What the text underlines is not so much the great effectiveness of common prayer, against that of personal prayer, but rather the importance given to those whose pray coincides with the right intention for praying. Two people are the smallest possible number so that there could be an agreement. The attention given to the prayer depends, therefore, on the fraternity of the diverse members of the community. Prayers which are merely egocentric are not to be heard¹⁵.

The specific action of Jesus' exhortation falls upon the *συμφωνητιν* (coming together to help) from v. 19, particularly on the necessity of common agreement, achieving the unity of hearts; that is, to travel together on a path towards deeper feelings with the goal of presenting ourselves together before God. It is significant that what is asserted here about the first Christian communities is that what happened in Pentecost: they lived in fraternal unity, they prayed together (cf. Acts 2:42), having together "only one heart and one soul" (Acts 4:32).

Christian spirituality, consequently, does not try to unite in one voice petitions and thanksgiving, but rather to do so bringing hearts together. To make an agreement is a difficult art, but we cannot make together this spiritual journey without this laborious path of recognizing the other, their alterity, their differences, their gifts and their service in the Church.

Without putting off differences and monopolizing unnecessarily the inner life of every person, what is at stake is the unique search for the coming Kingdom. Here unanimity is conferred: not through consensus, but rather through the conversion of our own thoughts to those of Jesus Christ.

Sixth step

Always and without getting tired (cf. Lk. 18:1-8; 21:34-36)

The interior life requires perseverance and continuity. Many times Jesus, with Paul following his example (cf. Rm. 12:12; Eph. 6:18, 1Ts. 5:17), reiterates the need for praying and searching for God without interruption. How is it possible to

¹⁵ Cf. U. Luz, *El evangelio según san Mateo (18-25)*, (*Matthew's Gospel*) *Sígueme*, Salamanca 2003.

live, work, rest, sleep, to be with others, and at the same time take on a deep spiritual life?

Saint Augustine would say that one of the secrets is to not become decentred in life from our core, which is God. Therefore it does not mean to continually repeat formulas and invocations, but rather to live a life characterized by that which the Fathers of the Church called *memoria Dei* – the constant recollection of God.

If there exists this awareness of God's presence, then the Holy Spirit who continually prays in us, can occupy our prayer in such a way that little by little a fount of living water arises within us (Jn. 7:38), a stream that cannot be stopped.



BY WAY OF CONCLUSION...

More than making a conclusion resuming what has been said in these pages, I will try and end what we have started, although it is not a true ending. For our aim in this journey are *the fruits of a life of conversion*. A passage which could help us to summarize this could be Mt. 3:7-12:

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not think to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. And even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. I baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

Amongst the people who come to be baptized, John the Baptist sees “many Pharisees and Sadducees” (v.7). Instead of being pleased, he calls their attention and threatens them. Matthew brings us close to those people for the first time, who little by little will be described with greater criticism up to the point of acquiring the role of Jesus’ adversaries and being characterized as neither believing in John nor in Jesus (cf. Mt. 21:32; 21:25 and Lk. 7:29-30).

The Baptist’s reaction can only be understood by taking into account his property as a prophet which allows him to see into men’s hearts. He therefore perceives the unbearable discord between the rite which the Pharisees believe they fulfil as an expression of faith, and the presence of a morale which presupposes radical incredulity. This brings to mind the reaction of the prophets faced with an imposing unfolding of Israelite shrines, with criticism of it being an unendurable lie (cf. Is. 1:11-15; Jer. 6:20; Hos. 6:6; Am. 5:17-21).

John the Baptist defines these people as a “race of vipers”, a truly contemptible description also used by Jesus (cf. Mt. 12:34; 23:33), together with the label of “hypocrites” (cf. Mt. 15:17; 22:18; 23:13.14.15), referring to the same people. In the eyes of the prophet, instead of being of human appearance, the Pharisees also

have the characteristics of venomous beasts (cf. Dt. 32:33; Is. 59:5; Ps. 140:4), and belong to the enemy race of humankind (cf. Gn. 3:15; Ap. 12:9). This distasteful expression could have been inspired by Ps. 58:5-6, where foolish judges – incapable of discernment and propagators of a judgment which kills the innocent – are symbolized as “venomous serpents” which will not be tamed by the flutist.

John the Baptist will therefore say to the Pharisees that they are deaf to the appeal of authentic justice. Instead of converting, they look for an escape from divine fury with strategies which are a sham. In the same sense Ps. 58:4 also talks of insincere judges who are “lost from the womb”. This would explain why John the Baptist enters into a discussion with them about being proud of their condition of being “sons of Abraham” (Mt. 3:9). In fact, those who considered themselves part of the chosen race for being legitimate descendants of the Patriarchs (cf. Jn. 8:33 and 39) and thus sons of Adam and of Seth, created “like God” (cf. Gn. 5:1), felt themselves to be automatically justified. They were destined to be saved and a long way from the anger reserved for the evil ones; that is, sons of Satan condemned to burn like straw in the fire (cf. Is. 5:24; Mal. 3:19; Mt. 3:12).

John the Baptist does not reject the Pharisees; he does not say this, nor would he unless they expelled him. He invites them to accept the baptismal rite with a different awareness: a spirit of truth and humility. That is why he prompts the “hypocrites” to undergo a triple advancement in the spiritual life.

The first and the most fundamental step is that of acknowledging that all is grace. To be a son of Abraham (v. 9) is a gift, conferred without any merit, so much so that God could do the same with stones; that is, with those who are not spiritually inclined.

The second step consists in bringing forth “fruits worthy of conversion” (v.8). Through this expression John the Baptist asks the Pharisees to undertake deeds of repentance, signs that express a true change of heart. Which ones? Matthew doesn't tell us in this passage, but bringing to mind the passage of the Sermon on

the Mount we could think that it is about those “good fruits”, those who come from the good tree (cf. Mt. 7:17-20). These fruits are spiritual fruits, fruits of the Spirit, that is: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity meekness, and self-rule” (Gal. 5:26; see also Eph. 5:9-11; 2Peter 1:5-7).

To not live according to the flesh (according to the impulse of envy, discord or violence), but rather according to the Spirit is to live like God; this amounts to really being sons of God. Man can long for this, but how can we receive God’s Spirit? Herein lies the third step which the Baptist indicates, the Baptism rite made in “in the fire and the Holy Spirit” (v.11). That which man can yearn for but not fulfil is a gift by faith in the one who is Christ; for he is full of power and is especially able to love. So it is in the “desert” we can only wait with a trusting hope, ‘ad-viene’ (for that which comes). That is when the Lord Jesus “comes” to human poverty to make it a place of dwelling for sanctity, so that the Spirit will “come” and renew the world.

As a community of God’s sons and daughters we have to open the doors so that a new air of forgiveness and conversion can enter in. Only from there can we bear fruit and through these our Father may be glorified (cf. Mt. 5:16).

Fr. Luciano Audisio
Santo Tomás de Villanueva College
Granada, Spain



ORDEN DE AGUSTINOS RECOLETOS
INSTITUTO DE ESPIRITUALIDAD E HISTORIA