

Consecrated Life: Contemplation and New Evangelization

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It is important after fifty years to rediscover the programmatic value of Chapter Five of the dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, dedicated “to the universal call to holiness”. If the Council Fathers gave such importance to this theme, it was not simply to confer a type of spiritual touch to ecclesiology, but to make manifest an intrinsic and qualifying dynamic of the Church. The rediscovery of the Church as “mystery”, i.e., as a people “brought together by the unity of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”, could only imply the rediscovery of its “holiness”, understood in the fundamental sense of belonging to Him who is Holy *par excellence*, “the three times Holy” (cf. *Is* 6: 3). Professing the Church as holy means to point to its being as Christ’s spouse, for whom he surrendered himself to sanctify the Church (cf. *Eph* 5: 25-26). This gift of holiness, so to say “objective holiness”, is offered to every baptized person: “This is the will of God, your sanctification” (1 *Tes* 4: 3).

It is here that I would like to introduce some considerations: *the style of life of the consecrated person*. The life of sanctity is expressed along the path of following Christ which inspires behavior. It would be useless to seek a short cut from this command; belonging to Christ and consecration become visible and should be visible in the witness of a life led according to the law of that discipleship. The style of life, therefore, becomes the criterion of discernment, necessary and fundamental for the truth of belonging. We know that the evangelical counsels intend to manifest the originality and the radicalness of this style of consecrated life. Poverty, chastity and obedience, while on the one hand fully express the act of the free choice of consecration, on the

other hand they make the path of the Gospel evident as the way of life which deserves to be followed and lived, because it gives sense and meaning to our lives.

Choosing to leave something is geared to wanting to follow a person who is the ultimate and supreme meaning of one's existence. It truly can be asserted that it is precisely this dimension of following the path of holiness which makes that "constructive renouncement" possible, which, on the one hand obliges us to leave something, and on the other allows the unique experience of seeing one's personal existence progressively constructed in the attainment of a goal that brings meaning with it. In the end, it expresses a growing dynamic which in its ecclesial experience makes the nature of the Spouse of Christ visible, as well as the "Body of the Trinity", to use Tertullian's extreme expression. Concerning this aspect, both the Old and New Testaments express a disarming continuity. From the imperative of the book of Leviticus: "You will be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy" (*Lv* 19: 2), to the command of the Apostle: "This is the will of God, your sanctification" (*1 Tes* 4: 3), we witness an impressive continuity.

In other words, the universal vocation to holiness has no other name than the universal vocation to love as Christ has revealed it. The vocation to this revealed love is absolute, because it requires a complete and total giving of oneself without asking anything in exchange. We are called to love "with your whole heart, with your whole soul, with all of your strength" (...). We are thus in the presence of the absence of measurement which obliges us to accept as the only proper measurement that which was achieved by Jesus of Nazareth on the Cross: "giving it all" and going "until the end", and "forever", without asking in return. The one who follows Christ and consecrates his existence to Him knows that this love endures everything, except one thing: that we place limits on that love. Saint Theresa of the Child Jesus, in her autobiography, offers a commentary on love: "When I looked upon the mystical body of the Church, I recognized myself in none of the members which St. Paul described, and what is more, I desired to distinguish myself more favorably within the whole body. Love appeared to me to be the hinge for my vocation. Indeed I knew that the Church had a body

composed of various members, but in this body the necessary and more noble member was not lacking; I knew that the Church had a heart and that such a heart appeared to be aflame with love. I knew that one love drove the members of the Church to action, that if this love were extinguished, the apostles would have proclaimed the Gospel no longer, the martyrs would have shed their blood no more. I saw and realized that love sets off the bounds of all vocations, that love is everything, that this same love embraces every time and every place. In one word, that love is everlasting. Then, nearly ecstatic with supreme joy in my soul, I proclaimed: O Jesus, my love, at last I have found my calling: my call is love. Certainly I have found my proper place in the Church, and you gave me that very place, my God. In the heart of the Church, my mother, I will be love, and thus I will be all things, as my desire finds its direction.”

Furthermore, there is an essential relationship between action, the external activity for the needs of present life, and contemplation, being occupied beyond time in order to gaze upon truth. While action and contemplation are at times perceived as antithetical, they are not in opposition to one another. St. Thomas Aquinas had noted that the highest form of Christian mission, evangelization, is a part of the active life and the Apostles needed the counsels for the perfection of their active work of evangelization. Thus, if we want to evangelize, we must contemplate. Our mission is both action and contemplation.

Faith comes from Love: Lumen fidei and Evangelii gaudium situate the relationship between faith and love in the first place. Probably, the originality of what the Pope wishes to communicate lies in this coupling of the two and it is this which underlies his pastoral perspective. It could not be otherwise. The heart of the faith is the Trinitarian love of God, which is revealed in Jesus Christ, He who is at the origin of the faith and who brings it to fulfilment (cf. Heb. 12: 2). In fact, the structure of what is contained in the pages of these texts is impressive, as a circular structure, and their contents are presented within that structure: of the love that generates faith and the faith which sustains love. Just as there is the “light of faith”, so we are placed before the “light of love” (Lf 34). Pope Francis seems to be saying to us that in order to acquire in

a coherent way the knowledge of the contents of the faith and to witness to them, we must equip ourselves with the “reasons of the heart”. Such “reasons” allow us to grasp the complex theological topic of knowing through faith, which for the Pope is to be re-examined in the light of *knowing through love*. Love is the foundation that enables believers to build their lives on rock rather than on the instability of sand. Someone believes if he or she is loved. Love opens up to us a knowledge of a truth that, previously, was un hoped for and unexpected, but which has become real and visible. It is love which enables us to recognise the needs of others, not as some external reality, but as those of brothers and sisters who are suffering and who are in need.

“To touch with the heart, this is to believe” (Lg 31), the Holy Father affirms, citing St. Augustine. We could hardly find a more flexible expression than this to describe the genesis of faith. It is grace which transforms the heart and which brings about the beginning of faith: *gratia facit fidem*. That means that the first move comes always from God, who calls people to himself and who allows himself to be *seen* and to be *touched*. In this move, it is grace which enables us to recognise the presence of God. This is why it touches the heart; because it throws open the heart to make possible a knowledge that is deeper. In a word, the heart, touched by the Spirit, allows us to recognise Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God and the Lord. This theme recurs often with Pope Francis. In *Evangelii gaudium*, he focuses more directly on this theme when he writes: “*Primerear* – ‘to take the initiative’; please, excuse me for this neologism. The community of evangelization experiences the fact that the Lord has taken the initiative, has gone before them in love, and, therefore, it is able to take the first step without fear, to go out to meet and to search for those who are far away and to go to the crossroads to invite those who are marginalised” (Eg 24).

Besides, re-reading the faith in relation to love allows the Pope to bring out the very nature of the truth, to which those who believe abandon themselves. Truth, illuminated by love, makes the path more sure. Without this truth, the criticism that we believe in a “nice fairy tale” or that we are giving way to the “projection of our own

desires” (Lf 24) will always be present. This same aspect is present in *Evangelii gaudium*, where Pope Francis points out the limits of a pastoral care that, since it does not arise from love, becomes no more than a self-referential narcissism. This is the topic of “pastoral acedia” (Eg 82), which falls into the temptation of an “excess of activity”, by now deprived of a spirituality to give it strength and foundation. Faith generated by love, on the other hand, seeks the truth and desires it as an expression of a knowledge which is deeper and more genuine. The reference in *Lumen fidei* to an author such as William of St. Thierry allows the Pope to emphasise the deep unity between *believing*, *loving* and *evangelizing* and leads him to adopt a new logic for our knowledge: “These two eyes are reason which believes and love, which become one single eye, to attain the *contemplation of God*” (Lf 27).

The primacy of contemplation: We can start from this particular point to identify an important teaching of Pope Francis on evangelization. Contemplation is put in first place. An initial focus on this perspective can be found in the homily that the Pope preached during the *Year of Faith*, in his meeting with seminarians and novices. On that occasion, he said: “Evangelization is conducted on our knees” Exactly so! Pope Francis is convinced of the primacy of contemplation over action. He expresses this aspect several times in *Evangelii gaudium*. In order not to “run in vain” (Gal 2: 2) on the road of evangelization, it is necessary to focus on what is essential, to keep our gaze fixed on the face of Christ. This is real contemplation and this is the “first proclamation” that every Christian is called upon to undertake. To live in Christ, in order to know how to communicate him to and to share him with others. What we read in *Evangelii gaudium* is true: “Sitting before him with our hearts open, allowing him to contemplate us, we recognise that gaze of love that Nathaniel discovered on the day Jesus Christ introduced himself to him and said to him: ‘I saw you under the fig tree’ (Jn. 1: 48) ... Thus, what takes place, in the end, is ‘that which we have seen and what we have heard, we proclaim’ (1 Jn 1: 3). The best motivation for deciding that we should communicate the Gospel is to contemplate it with love, to ponder over its pages, and to read it with the

heart. If we approach it in this way, its beauty amazes us; it comes back each time to fascinate us. Hence, there is an urgent need to recover the spirit of *contemplation* that allows us to discover each day that we are the depositories of a good that humanises, that helps us to conduct a new life. There is nothing better that we can transmit to others” (Eg 264).

Thus, it is only to the extent that we live from this power that it is possible to put into action what Pope Francis calls the “mysticism of fraternity”. This is not some form of generalised fraternity, deprived of any reference to God, which would remain at the level of purely immanent social commitment, but it is a brotherhood that draws its strength from its foundation, rediscovered in Christ and in his solidarity with the whole of humanity. Thus, it is a brotherhood that is transformed by mysticism and that is orientated on the basis of the example of Jesus Christ: “Today, when the networks and the instruments of communication have attained unheard of levels of development, we feel the challenge of discovering and of transmitting the ‘mysticism’ of living together, of mixing with each other, of meeting each other and of taking each other in our arms, of supporting each other, of sharing in this rather chaotic tide that can be transformed into a true experience of fraternity, into a caravan of solidarity, into a holy pilgrimage” (Eg 87). In a way that is even more direct: “When we live the mysticism of drawing closer to others, with the intention of seeking their good, we expand our interiority in order to receive the most beautiful gifts of the Lord. Every time that we meet another human being in love, we place ourselves in a position where we can discover something new in regard to God” (Eg 272).

To Confess our Faith: Before confessing doctrine, Pope Francis seems to be saying, it is necessary for us to profess with our lives the merciful love of God. Mercy is becoming the word which defines the pontificate of Pope Francis and it is the characteristic feature of his preaching. We are called to offer signs of mercy to make the credibility of our faith evident. This is a mercy which is extended to the different situations of life: from the personal to the communitarian, from the family to the social.

In short, the love of God that never tires of forgiving those who approach him and who turn to him to obtain the comfort of his love. The Church “lives from an inexhaustible desire to offer mercy, the fruit of having experienced the infinite mercy of the Father and the capacity of that mercy to spread far and wide” (Eg 24).

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