

Spiritual life

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ANGELO BIANCINI, Annunciation

Words of Spirituality

by ENZO BIANCHI

Our life as Christians is not about going 'beyond' or 'further,' always in search of something new, but rather about going in depth

It is essential today to reaffirm these basic truths, because we live in a time in which the life of the church, dominated by pastoral concerns, has come to reflect the idea that the experience of faith is based on social involvement rather than on the discovery of a personal relationship with God lived in a community context, rooted in attentive listening to the Word of God contained in Scripture, formed by the Eucharist, and expressed in a life of faith, hope, and love. Reducing the Christian experience to its ethical dimension is the quickest and most direct way to empty faith of its meaning. Faith leads us to a genuine experience of God: in other words, it introduces us to spiritual life, which is life guided by the Holy Spirit. Anyone who believes in God also needs to experience God - correct ideas about God are not enough. The experience of God, which always takes place in a context of faith and not of sight (cf. 2 Cor 5:7: "We walk by faith, not by sight"), is an experience whose authenticity startles us. We find ourselves repeating with Jacob, "The Lord is in this spot, although I did not know it!" (Genesis 28:16), or with the Psalmist, "Behind and before you encircle me (...). From your presence, where can I flee? If I ascend to the heavens, you are there; if I lie down in Sheol, you are there too" (Psalm 139:5ff).

At other times our spiritual experience is marked by emptiness, by the silence of God, by an aridity that leads us to repeat Job's words: "If I go to the east, he is not there; or to the west, I cannot perceive him; where the north enfolds him, I behold him not; by the south he is veiled, and I see him not" (Job 23:8-9). Yet even in the silence of daily life God can speak to us. He acts in our life through the experiences life offers us, and this means that he also acts in our times of crisis, in the moments of darkness and confusion in which we find ourselves. The spiritual experience is above all the experience of being preceded: it is God who goes before us, searches for us, and calls us. We do not invent the God with whom we want to enter in relationship - he is already there! The experience of God is necessarily mediated by Christ: "no one comes to the Father except through me," says Jesus (John 14:6). The spiritual experience is also the experience of discovering that we are children of God. The Holy Spirit is the light with which God lights our path and directs us toward sanctification, and on this path we follow the Son. The spiritual experience becomes nothing other than our response in faith, hope and love to God the Father, who addresses to each of us, in baptism, the words that reveal our identity: "You are my son," or "You are my daughter." Sons and daughters in Jesus Christ the Son: this is the promise and the path revealed to us in baptism! In the words of Irenaeus of Lyon, the Spirit and the Son are like the two hands with which God shapes our life into a life of freedom in obedience, of relationship and communion with him and with one another.

The authenticity of the spiritual journey depends on several essential elements. The crisis of our self-image is the painful but necessary beginning of conversion in which our unreal, idealized 'I', the 'I' that we have built for ourselves and that we were convinced we needed to develop in our search for self-fulfillment, is shattered. Without this 'crisis' we do not arrive at true life according to the Spirit. If we do not die to ourselves we cannot be reborn to the new life offered to us in baptism (cf. Romans 6:4). The authenticity of the spiritual journey also depends on honesty toward reality and faithfulness to reality - in other words, adherence to reality - because it is within history and within daily life, with others and not without them, that we come to know God and grow in our relationship with him. It is here that our spiritual life can harmonize obedience to God and faithfulness to the earth in a life of faith, hope and love. It is here that we can say our 'yes' to the God who calls us with the gifts and limitations that characterize our identity as created beings. We are then able to set out on a journey of faith, following in the footsteps of Christ, that will lead us to the experience of Christ dwelling in us. Paul writes to the Christians of Corinth, "Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in faith (...). Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you?" (2 Corinthians 13:15). The spiritual life unfolds in our 'heart,' our inmost self, where our desires, decisions and will take shape.

It is here that we should be able to recognize the authenticity of our Christian identity. Our life as Christians is not about going 'beyond' or 'further,' always in search of something new, but rather about going in depth and discovering that our heart is the Holy of Holies, the sanctuary of the temple of God that is our body. We discover the meaning of the words "Sanctify the Lord in your hearts" (cf. 1 Peter 3:15). It is in our heart that our sanctification - our welcoming the divine life of the Trinity within us - takes place. "Whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him" (John 14:23). The goal of the spiritual life is our participation in the life of God, which the church fathers called 'divinization.' "God became man so that man could become God," writes Gregory Nazianzen, and in the writings of Maximus the Confessor we find the following sublime summary: "Our divinization takes place when divine love comes to dwell within us, to the point that we forgive our enemies as Christ did on the cross.

When is it that you become God? When you are able, like Christ on the cross, to say, 'Father, forgive them,' or even, 'Father, I give my life for them.'" This is the point to which we are led in the spiritual life, a life rooted in faith in God our Father and Creator, set in motion and guided by the Spirit who sanctifies, and lived in communion with the Son who redeems us and teaches us to love as he loved us. It is here that we measure our growth to the full stature of Christ.

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