



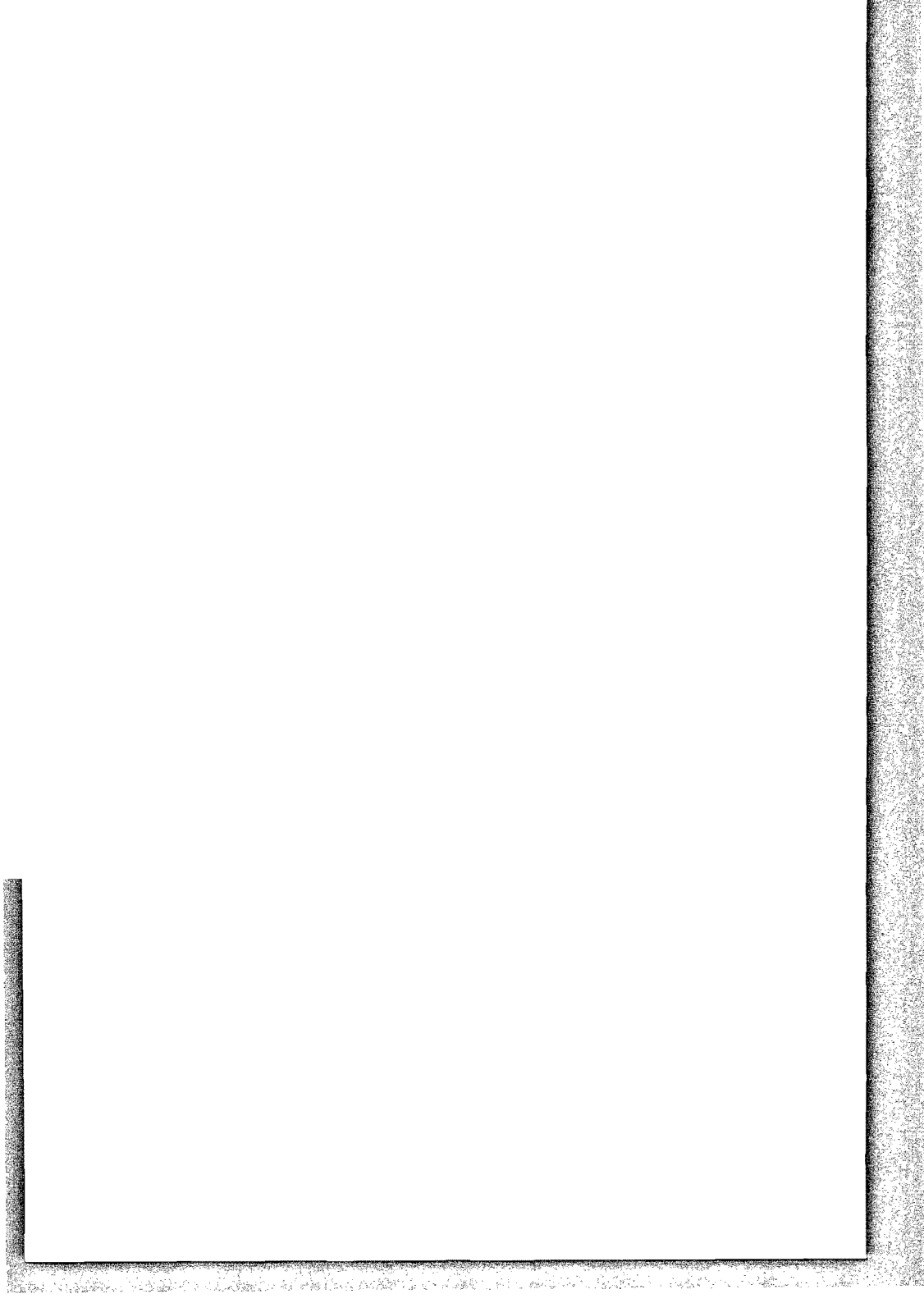
PROGRESSIO

COME DOWN TO MEET GOD

Benjamín González Buelta, S.J.

*Supplement Nos 42 * 43 * 44 **
December 1995

PUBLICATION OF THE WORLD CHRISTIAN LIFE COMMUNITY
C.P. 6139-(Borgo S. Spirito, 8)-00195 Rome-ITALY
English-Spanish-French Editions
Editor: Roswitha Cooper



COME DOWN TO MEET GOD

A Life of Prayer Among the Poor

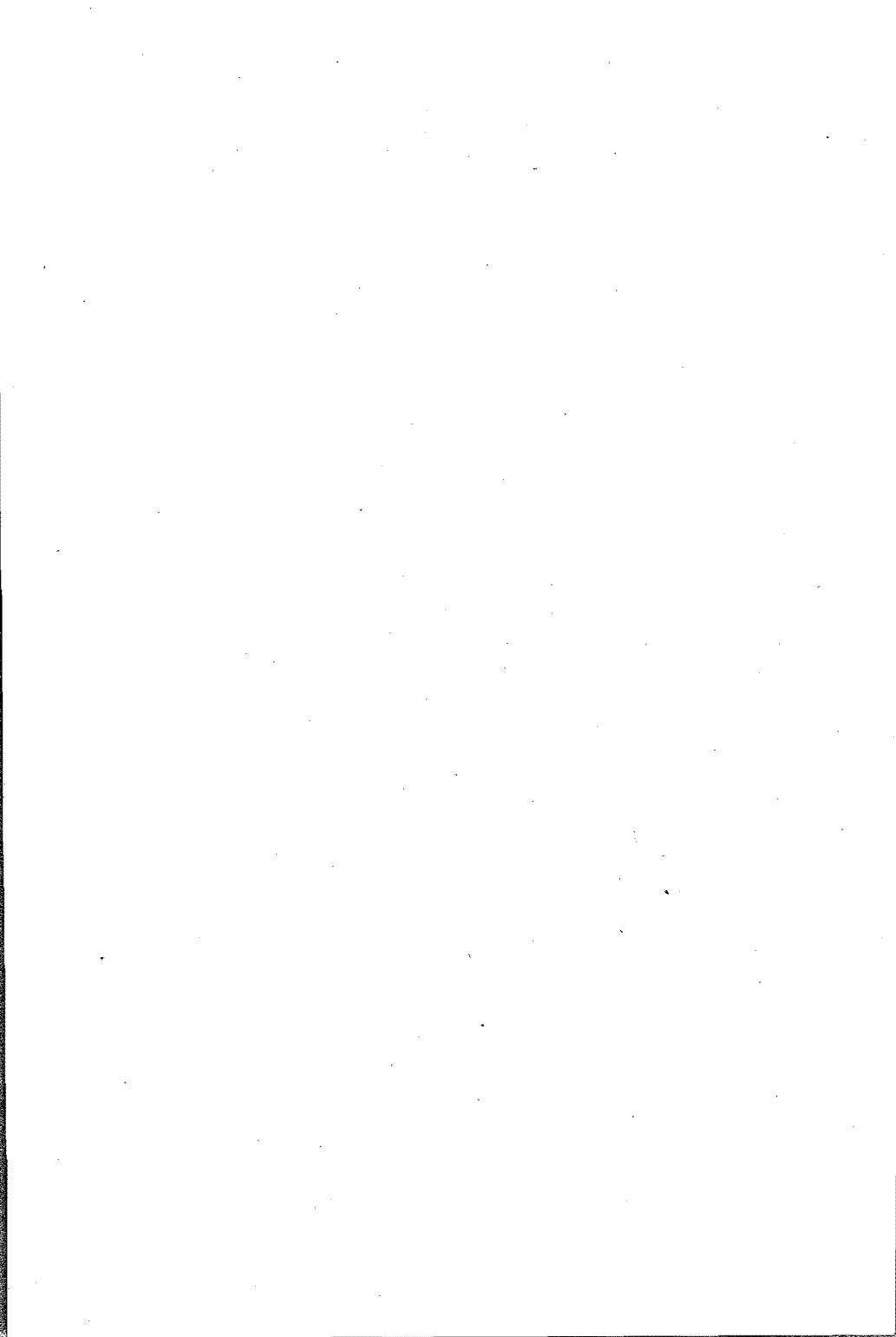
by Benjamín González Buelta, S.J.

Original Spanish language edition published
by Editorial SAL TERRAE, Santander.

Translated from the Spanish by Theresa Cademartori

CONTENTS

Foreword	1
I. Parable of the Oppressed	3
II. Aspects of the Experience of God among the Oppressed	5
III. A Unifying Experience	19
IV. The Way of Prayer	27
1. Contemplative Prayer	27
2. The Prayer of Discernment	39
3. Contemplation in Action	49
4. Community Celebration	61
V. The Dynamism of Prayer Life	73
VI. A Living Synthesis	85
VII. A Privileged Sacrament of the Meeting with God	89
VIII. The Scandal of Mortal Flesh	93
IX. The Pedagogy of a Prayer Life	97



Foreword

It is a joy for me to place this little book in the hands of the Christian Life Community.

These pages were born in the hearts of Christians who understood that community is an essential dimension of Christian life. Faith in Jesus calls us and unites us so that we can arrive together at the fullness of life. In this communitarian encounter, the diversity and the uniqueness of each person becomes stronger and is affirmed as a new aspect of this God who, in his infinite creativity, never repeats himself. By uniting, we become stronger without forcing ourselves to compete with one another in an individualistic way. Peter, John, Thomas, Mary... all grow in their individuality but they work side by side with others, and never at the expense of the other.

Secondly, this experience began in a community of the poor, the marginalized of this world: those who are considered superfluous, those who are seen as a threat to our theological syntheses, our tranquillity and our ways. When the marginalized have heard God's word, they rediscover the sense of their dignity as they stand before a God who speaks to them face to face. They stand before Jesus in whom the Word has become flesh, who lived within geographic borders, who spoke a dialect that was suspect in that confused Galilee. When they begin to speak their own word, the Word again becomes flesh in this new incarnation, in these wounded and rejected people.

We no longer go to the poor to bring them a word, a teaching, some help... but in a much deeper way, we go to contemplate the living presence of God among those who are "outside," (Luke 2,7) to be united to God in his work of delivering from all evil and all injustice. Not all of us can approach the poor in a direct or permanent way. Never-

theless, all of us can continue to grow in the ever-more perceptive awareness of their problems, and to collaborate, according to our means, in building a more fraternal world. If we go to the poor with this attitude, we will receive immense benefits, because meeting them will bring us closer to God who, in a way that always surprises us, identifies with the poor and the little ones.

Finally, these pages are written from the heart of Ignatian spirituality. This vibrant charism, that we continually receive from God, especially prepares us to draw near to complex realities and to the real world with all its challenges. In the Spiritual Exercises we contemplate Jesus, eternal King who, along the highways and byways, announces the coming of the Kingdom. New life gushes forth from this same center of reality.

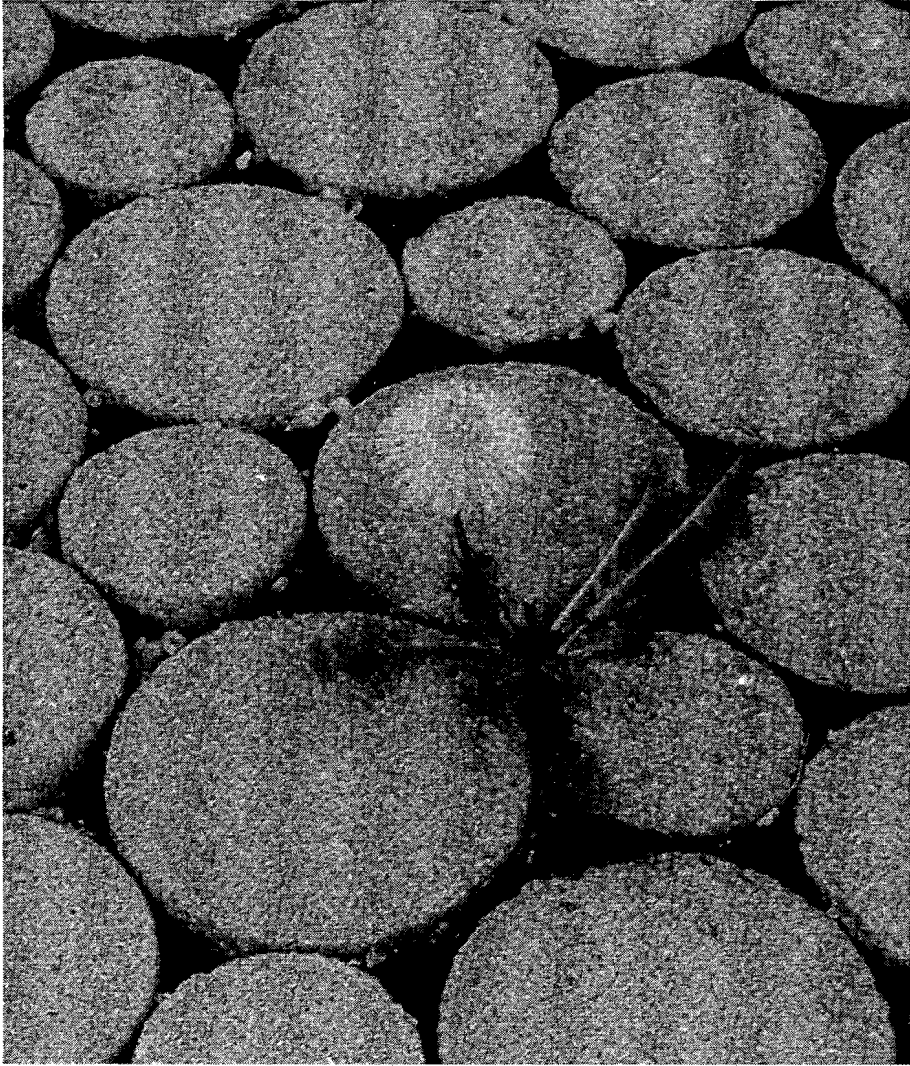
As the Christian Life Community follows Jesus today, it announces its faith in this God of life in the midst of the shadows of unbelief, and fights for the justice of the Kingdom in a world where suffering has reached shocking depths.

The experience that these pages present is born "outside" and "below" where the poor live. It is tiny like the mustard seed (Mark 4, 30-32). But it can grow if we sow it in a welcoming earth. It can help us to create a spiritual structure to "come down to meet God" in this faltering humanity where God today is made manifest in the liberating strength of his Kingdom.

Benjamín González Buelta, S.J.

I

Parable of the oppressed



In the fields of the Dominican Republic there grows a weed, made up of half a dozen long leaves, that the peasants call "junquillo." Within the ground its roots spread out in all directions, so that when you pull out one plant, a few days later another grows in its place. It is impossible to eliminate.

One day I saw workers pour a layer of asphalt in the patio of a house to get rid of the "junquillo." But a few days later, a tiny leaf began to push its little green head up through the black asphalt. How can such a fragile leaf push through such hard asphalt? How can such strong life be formed in the mystery of the earth?

When we live among those oppressed by structures as hard as asphalt, we not only encounter death but also a network of life, of resistance, of organization, of solidarity that oppression has not been able to eliminate.

As we walk towards a meeting with the oppressed, each step also takes us towards a meeting with God oppressed beneath the asphalt. God unceasingly creates life and liberty in the hiddenness of this fertile earth until the hour of justice arrives.

II

Aspects of the experience of God among the oppressed

*Why are you Galileans standing here looking into the sky?
(Acts 1,11)*

*Make your own mind the mind of Christ Jesus: Who being in the form of God did not count equality with God something to be grasped. But he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, becoming as human beings are...
(Phil. 2,5-7).*

Frequently, we speak of "ascending" to a meeting with God. However, Paul speaks of "descending" to the slave Jesus.

When the Latin American Church began to look down, our domain was invaded with sects that invited us to look up. "*You poor of Latin America, why are you standing there looking at the earth filled with problems? Look towards the heavens where God is and from where our unique salvation will come.*" These are the new "angels" that bring us a message contrary to the one the apostles received on the Mount of the Ascension.

Far from standing there looking at heaven with a paralysing nostalgia, we are invited to look at the world and the future where God will manifest himself. The disciples returned to Jerusalem where Jesus had been killed and where they were but a small, menaced group. They returned to history where they had to start building the Kingdom from nothing, following Jesus until he returns.

Jesus emerges from below, flowing forth from the depths of society. The grotto of Bethlehem, his Galilean peasant's accent, the prisons of the Sanhedrin and of Pilate were all down below. From this existence a radically new future flows forth.

When we say that Jesus "ascended" it must mean that he also descended into the lower regions of the earth (Eph. 4,9). Jesus moved with predilection among the outcasts of the earth, raising up those paralyzed by the world of the synagogue. His closest friends sensed the whole social and religious burden placed upon the people from above.

When He was "one among many," Jesus experienced God as a Father of goodness and nearness. He notes with joy how the Father reveals his plan to the simple and hides it from the wise and the clever (cf. Luke 10,21). This hiddenness and this revelation caused him to give thanks with a great exclamation. In his "descent" Jesus delivers himself to the work of the Father who has revealed it to him, a Father to whom he cries out from the cross.

The idolatrous gods of this world are above and seek worshippers, blind followers of their ideas, consumers addicted to their products, fanatics seduced by their exhibition, cheap workers for their luxury residences, submissive multipliers of their capital.

The Lord of history is not forced on us from above. Christians experience the birth of something new, even though it be fragile like the first communities in the world of the Roman Empire. Thus, they have gone from being slaves to martyrs, witnesses to God's liberating hand. If we are to meet God today, we must look down and direct our steps and our commitment there.

God died outside the city

Therefore, Jesus also suffered outside the gate, to consecrate the people by his own blood. Let us then go to him outside the camp, bearing the reproach that he bore. For here we have no lasting city but we seek the one that is to come.

(Heb. 13,12-14)

The letter to the Hebrews invites us to go outside the city, to meet Jesus where he was killed. To come into contact with God, we must seek someone who, according to the rulers of this world, has no place in the heart of society.

Religious life started as a going towards geographical deserts far from the corruption of the city. Later it turned towards the deserts of monasteries and convents. Here, alone with God, exposed to the spiritual combat, enlightened in their renunciation by their nearness to God, religious life became a proclamation of the absolute.

Today, religious life has turned towards the desert of the outcasts in the barrios and in the fields. Here we find those whom society has excluded, persons of an "inferior category" like the trash upon which "progress" is constructed. This encounter reduces us to silence, and we begin to see the city, the Church, the word of God and our own personal history in a new way. In this silence we begin an interior battle against our own complicity and against the exterior "demons" incarnated in certain laws, institutions and persons.

When we live among the marginalized, we realize that we do not have here a "permanent city" in the true sense of the word. To push the poor still further away, we evict them by lining up modern machinery and, in just a few hours, knocking down their old wooden houses. An area is turned into a heap of rubbish that we get rid of to "clean up" the city. With the houses, we also destroy the people's organizations, friendships, the little securities they had slowly constructed in the midst of misery, and the short walk to a poorly paid job which permits them to survive.



Jesus met the Father in the desert, alone in the midst of creation. He also met him as one living on the edge, the desert of history. The evangelists often show us Jesus praying on the mountain far from his disciples. But Jesus also meets the Father, who calls him his beloved Son, (Luke 3,22) when he is baptized in solidarity with a poor, sinful people.

In leaving the city, religious life takes on the burden of the outcasts' humiliation and is looked at with suspicion. There, it meets a persecuted people who have constructed "the future city" of liberty and justice. Leaving its own camp and going out into the desert of history, it meets God and with him a people who have been thrown aside.

Cloisters and images of the oppressed God

Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit - (1 Cor. 6,19)

Religious life has created areas of silence and art to help contemplation. We remember cloisters that were worked on for years: great slabs of marble laid for the floor, graceful columns with faces of angels on the top. To the contemplative passing by, signs of faith emerge from the niches and walls.

Among the outcasts, we encounter narrow, irregular alleys where the garbage decomposes until the next rainfall cleans it away. We move among hovels constructed with old wood and mended with the wastes of this consumer society: boxes and plastic bags with commercial names imprinted on them. These people live under the constant menace of landslides, floods and eviction. In these alleys, where there is no room for family intimacy, children play, discussions arise and fiestas are celebrated. The young flee from here, risking their lives on illegal and fragile embarkations trying to reach neighboring countries, using drugs as an evasion or following ideologies and groups which offer impossible dreams. Here solidarity and strength are also woven around the lives of the survivors. It is in this land that Christian communities are budding, communities capable of making a commitment and singing their hope. These are our cloisters. Each person is a temple of God.

It has always been easy for us to silence statues with flowers and lights. The faces that we meet here are more challenging for contemplatives than any images, and the fatigued face of a man or woman calls us into question far more than the reclining statue on a grave. The angels on the columns are mute before these children whose eyes follow us. Such is the image of the living God. At times, in the cry of the poor, there is a word that condemns and denounces like a two-edged sword (Heb. 4,12); at other times, in its commitment to the Kingdom, we find goodness and solidarity.



Day by day, in this reality as hard as a rock, the contemplative gaze brings to light the face of God, giving it more precision than if it had been chiseled in stone. Slowly, persons and names become transparent and we can perceive the glory of God in humanity. In contemplative silence we hope that signs of new life will shine in the midst of the night, and that through apostolic works new communities and organizations will arise for the service of the Kingdom.

Persons and alleys have been transformed into a means of communication with the living God, a much stronger means than any cloister or statue. God is engaged here. Resurrected from the dead, God is a presence that cannot be extinguished, a Paschal mystery which is revealed as free and unpredictable.

In the dry bones of the people

The hand of the Lord was laid on me and he carried me away by the spirit of Yahweh and set me down in the middle of a valley, a valley full of bones."...can these bones live?"

"Our bones are dried up, our hope has gone; we are as good as dead." "I am now going to open your graves;... and lead you back to the soil of Israel. I shall put my spirit in you and you will live..." (Ez. 37,1-14)

The Babylonian people, who were in exile, lived in such a difficult situation that it is compared to a valley of dry, charred bones. Other prophets before Ezekiel had spoken a similar language. To the oppressors of the people Micah says: *"They have devoured the flesh of my people and torn off their skin and crushed their bones"* (Micah 3,2).

Our slums on the fringes of society have also been reduced to dry bones. Present circumstances cause a continuous deterioration of the people's situation. Hunger grows, medicine is unattainable, illness becomes chronic, and the work is scarce, difficult and poorly paid. The hovels also are being converted into the sepulchers of a people who have lost all hope and who say: "Our bones are charred, our hope has been banished, we are lost" (Ez. 37,11).

The prophet announces God's plan to the people: to open their graves, to take them out of their sepulchers, to put his spirit in them so that they be revived, and to give them a land. By this process of liberation, *"they will know that I Yahweh have said and done this."* The people will meet the God of history by experiencing new life and liberty.

Jesus also lived this experience. In accepting his message of liberation, dried out hands regained life, and paralyzed bodies carried their stretchers. The people's illiterate silence finds its voice and begins to teach the wise. In a community built around himself, Jesus assembles those who are dispersed; thus a new people is born.



Religious life chose to become a part of this people and to participate somehow in this situation of death. It is not the ecclesial prison of the mystical experience of St. John of the Cross, or of Ignatius of Loyola. Nor is it that of the Roman Empire which imprisoned Paul. It is the prison of an entire people caught between economic, ideological, military and political bars and bolts that are as difficult to open as the doors of well-guarded and sealed tombs (Mt. 27,26), a prison where an "immense multitude" is crushed (Ez. 37,10). Still in this situation of death, we also have the experience of the historical God who revives those reduced to bones, who draws them into communities, and who starts them on a journey towards a just future. Religious life bears witness to God's intervention and is transformed into a more luminous sign of eschatological plenitude.

The folly that makes us free

For since in the wisdom of God the world did not come to know God through wisdom, it was the will of God through the foolishness of the proclamation to save those who have faith. (1 Cor. 1,21)

With its fascinating beauty, its inexhaustible fertility and its mysteries which have challenged scientists of all epochs, creation is a word spoken by the creative love of God. For this reason it has always led us on a natural journey towards a meeting with God.

But when we look at creation from here below, it appears wounded by the barricades that are expressions of thievery. Urbanistic plans with their scenery cannot hide the misery which spreads uncontrollably, climbing the hills bordering the big cities and emerging almost sharply alongside the freeway, launching its children into commercial areas. Here we cannot contemplate beauty without heeding the pain of the wounded. The birds eat and the flowers are vested in beautiful colors, but why is it that people, who have more value than birds or flowers, cannot eat nor find clothes to wear, nor move about freely? We must seek the Kingdom of God in order to heal the wound (cf. Mt.6,33).

In creation, God seems to be encircled with light and a mantle of stars. God asks us: *"Have you ever in your life given orders to the morning or set the dawn to its post?"* (Job 38,12).. Faced with the wounds of creation, with the prosperity of the wicked and the sufferings of the poor, we ask God: *"Why do the wicked still live on, their power increasing with their age?"* (Job 21,7).

At the beginning of his mission, through his miracles and because of the people's enthusiasm, Jesus appears as a manifestation of God's creative and liberating force. But later, the prodigious signs of the Kingdom begin to disappear, and Jesus' life sinks into an obscure fidelity that the majority don't understand. The cross is disconcerting for the disciples, *"a scandal for the Jews and foolishness for the Gentiles. But the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength"* (1 Cor. 1,25). Creation lives out its liberation in the midst of labor pains (Rom. 8,22). The contemplation



of creation is carried out in this process of childbirth to which God is committed even to the cross of Jesus.

People not only contemplate the beauty of the earth and till it to produce food, but they also cut furrows in history where they sow a future of communion and justice. By their lives as new crucified servants following Jesus, the people want to liberate their lands, the small lands as well as the large ones, so that the water which the Creator sends for all, may really reach the poor.

The experience of God as creator and of God as liberator unite so that they cannot be separated neither in work nor in contemplation. In a land of slavery, to create is to liberate. Otherwise, all the discoveries of human life are stolen at their very conception, causing the accumulation of riches and well-being on the one hand, and frustration and oppression on the other.

As in the little community of Corinth composed of simple people (1 Cor. 1,26), only the "*folly of the cross*" gives meaning to a commitment to a liberation that fades into the horizon.

The Passover which resurrects cult

Spare me the din of your chanting, let me bear none of your strumming on lyres, but let justice flow like water and uprightness like a never-failing stream. (Amos 5,23-24)

Keep doing good works and sharing your resources, for these are the kinds of sacrifice that please God. (Heb.13,16)

The rites established for liturgical celebrations are marked on the corresponding pages of a book and follow the days and seasons of the calendar. We can expect to find them in a determined place and a precise time without fear of missing our appointment.

Life, however, moves in a different way. It is unpredictable; it moves with a precarious equilibrium and explodes suddenly with storms of violence accumulated from oppression. At other times it stagnates in a listless monotony that has no outlet.

Yet the depths of faith and the strength of goodness are just as surprising. There is little danger that this life remain imprisoned within the word of God, but it is possible that it cannot fit into our ceremonies and our exegesis. Before being a written word, the word of God was life. It was an efficacious word that does not return to God before it has been fulfilled (Is. 55,11).

When the word of God, and the sacramental life transmitted to us by the Church meet with the living Spirit in these bodies that are God's temples, God's strength and God's groanings (Rom. 8,26) then a living liturgy is born.

The happiest celebrations I have seen were among the poorest communities. They were not an evasion. The people's words and prayers



carried the lucidity of the prophets, and in their resurrected bodies you could touch the traces of the nails that their commitment to life and the Kingdom had left in their hands and feet.

They were not celebrations made rigid by habit, not a science nor an investment in God that would bring results if carried out properly. The language, the songs, the gestures, the exegesis were born in this land, and contain its coloring, its learning and its savor.

Religious life has come down to reconcile itself with its brothers and sisters who hold a complaint against it (cf. Mt 5,24). It confesses that it has squandered its days in faraway lands. People opened their homes, their painful Passovers and their feasts to it. In receiving this pardon and passover of the poor, it has met God who walks among his people, and who is in the midst of the celebration wiping away their tears (Rev.21,3-5).

Meeting with God who walks with his people

Yahweh preceded them by day in a pillar of cloud to show them the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could march by day and by night.

(Ex.13,21)

With the same pace with which we approach the poor to commit ourselves to them, we also approach God to meet and walk with Him. This meeting does not depend only on our responding to God who calls us, but also on the people who receive us and who allow us to have a close relationship with them. Integration is a gift from the God who calls us, and from the people who receive us. This meeting marks us for the rest of our lives. Our religious identity is not diminished, it is defined in a new way. This process begins with God's call to go out among the marginalized.

It takes a long journey to reach people's hearts. How can we advance through this labyrinth of symbols, of languages, of false approaches, that are like trenches impeding us from arriving at the depths of their reality? Perhaps these things also stop people from marching towards unity. In reality, there are torrents of life, of solidarity, of communion, that have been flowing in the people's veins for a long time. Torrents that have been expanding throughout the centuries with each new song and struggle.

All this reality reaches us like the fresh, hot bread of each day, like the manna that we have only to receive each day in the just measure allowed to us. The light that it contains begins to grow within us like an ardent fire which at time enlightens and at times burns. The fire enables us to separate the metal from the dross within ourselves and to be the mouth of God (Jer. 15,19). The religious community is born slowly as a sign of communion and hope.

Moses helped his people to allow themselves to be led by God who went before them to Mount Sinai, to the covenant and the prom-

ised land. But the people took Moses with them across a desert that he could not have crossed alone.

Jesus formed and guided the community of disciples, leading them to the limits of his passion and death. At the same time, the disciples transmitted to Jesus the warmth of friendship and helped make credible the proclamation of a Kingdom that creates community, one that cannot be announced in isolation. The people as a whole give Jesus a story, a race, a language. They permit him to be truly one of us, "*one among many*" (Phil. 2,7).

In this journey with God and with others, we can, at times, appear to be divided between two types of solidarity seemingly in opposition. "*Lord, why do you treat this people so harshly? Why did you send me?*" (Ex. 5,22). On other occasions we live in festive communion with the people, in their celebrations and in their work, advancing towards a new world and towards the fullness of the meeting with our God who "*goes before us.*"

III

A unifying experience

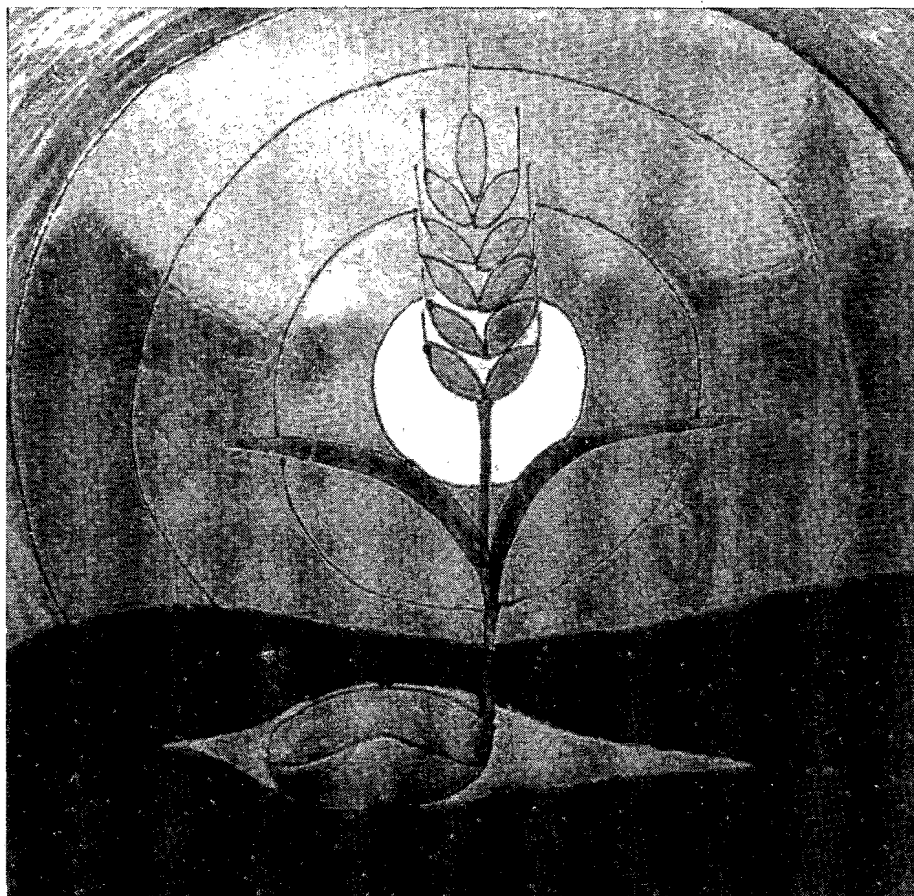
Union of the mystical and the prophetic

When our communities live among the poor, we become acutely aware of injustice. Misery constantly enters into us through all our senses. Not only do we listen to the people's cry; we also hear the clamor of the blood of the poor ringing out from "the very stones" of the luxurious buildings constructed with the miserable salaries of the poor (cf. Hab. 2,11). We do not look at things with the eyes of a tourist but with the eyes of a prophet.

This painful experience gives birth to words as hard as "*the two-edged sword*" (Heb. 4,12) demanding that we "*destroy and pull out*" (Jer. 1,1) what many call progress, order and profit. This word may sound subversive and the prophet, who announces the possibility and the necessity of living in a different way, is considered naive and is treated like a fool. Jeremiah will say: "*Yahweh's word has been the cause of insult and derision all day long*" (Jer. 20,8).

Yet if prophecy moves away from contemplation it dies. The prophet is only a servant of God's word, which is incarnated in the ambiguity of a human being who, from birth, is marked by the language of peasant or poet. At times the prophet seems to sink under the oppressive weight of attack, or of the bitterness of the message that must be given (Apoc. 10,10).

On other occasions, the prophet consoles an enslaved people (Isaiah 40,1). The prophet is also an educator who has discovered salvation springing forth in the midst of history and invites people to contemplate it (Is. 43,18). Or a prophet is one who paints the vision of a



future of freedom, encouraging people to celebrate and to commit themselves to the risk of crossing the desert (Is. 49,14-26).

The prophetic dimension is nourished by a contemplative experience. The prophet has a permanent relationship with God who must be listened to and from whom, at the opportune moment, an invitation is given to contemplate something new that is being freely offered. To contemplate a future that is being engendered in silence where nothing can be seen, in the maternal womb of history or in the secret depths of the earth.

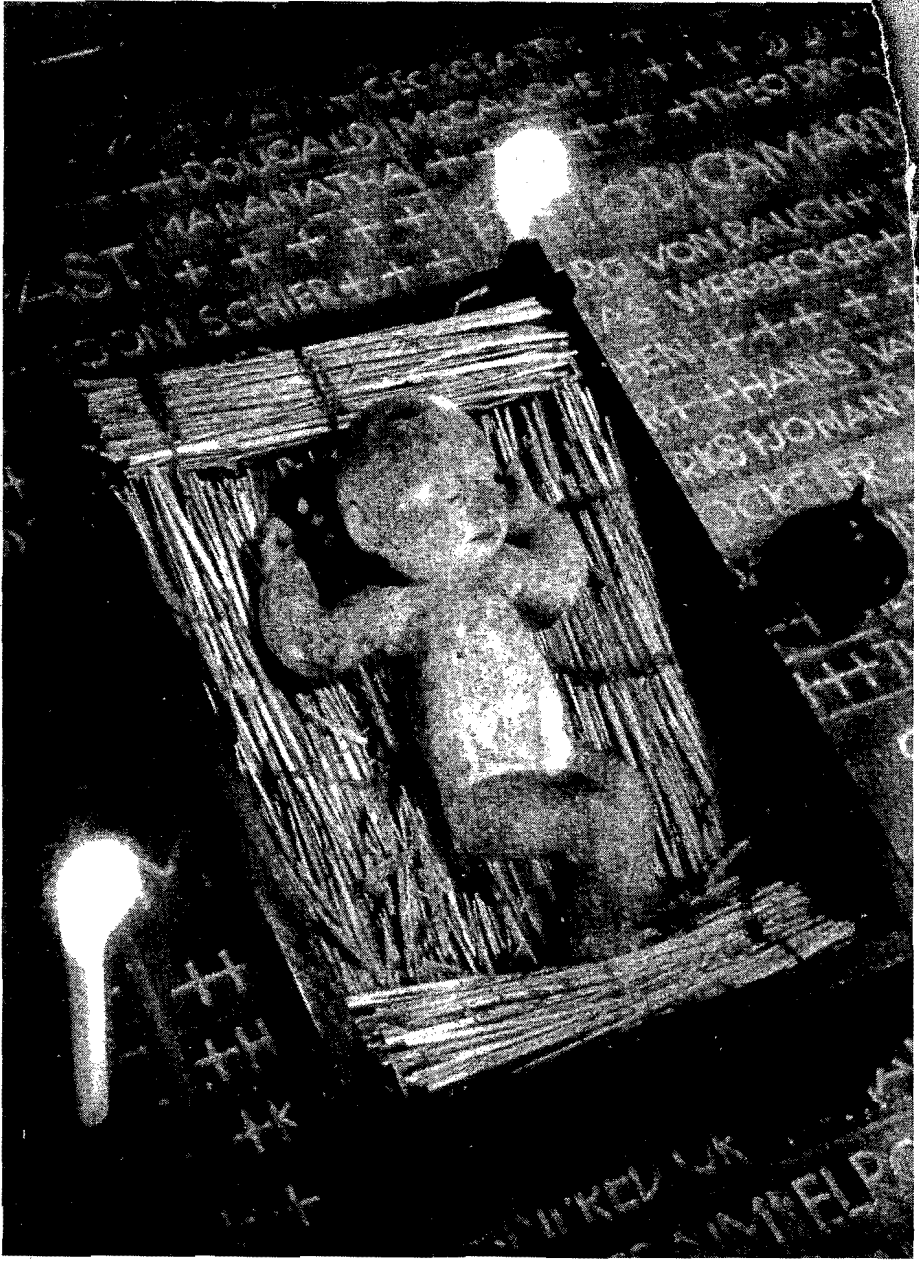
The exigencies of justice are revealed in a higher dimension of love and salvation, in the gratuity of God's gift. We cannot eliminate the unjust of this world in the same way that we would shake the crumbs off a tablecloth (Job 38,13). That's why we must rejoice with God at the repentant sinner, and not let ourselves die because God does not destroy the wicked when and how we feel like it (Jonah 3,8).

History is a mystery to us. God's plans and the way they are carried out are as far from our hearts and our minds as heaven is from earth (Is. 55,9). The last word of God is the wisdom born of love, surprisingly manifested in this permanent parable of creation which we must contemplate as a call to mystery in the fascination of the unknown. We contemplate it as God's unchangeable resolve to give abundant life, and as a continuous expression of forgiveness offered in the sun that rises each morning over the just and the unjust.

God comes in his own time and at his own pace. Through contemplation we must slowly allow the future to mature in us. We must see history as a maternal womb where new life is being formed until the day of birth arrives in the midst of pain and expectation (Is. 42,14). At times history, with all the power of the nations, obstinately sets itself against little communities like a stormy ocean rising against a little boat. Then, in spite of our fears and beyond all evidence, we must let ourselves be penetrated by the vision of abundance with all its colors and its songs (Apoc. 21).

Without contemplation, without opening ourselves to and having a relationship with God that touches all dimensions of our being, we will either choose other more or less efficacious idols, or we will consume ourselves in anguish or sadness.

Without prophecy and a commitment to transform the world, contemplation loses itself in an interior emptiness, far from the God of history.



Integration of the person into

the experience of God in history

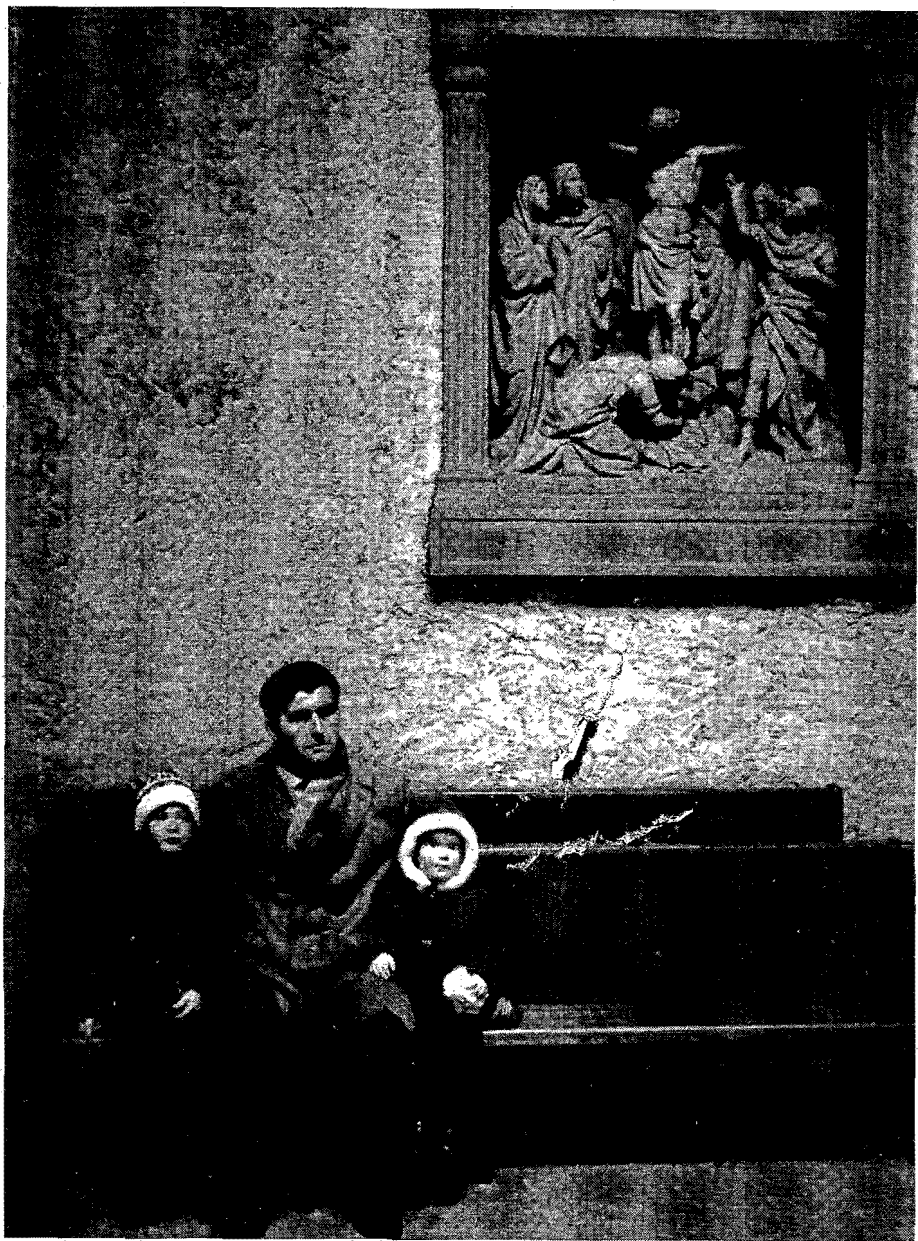
This way of living the relationship between contemplation and prophecy permits us to have a better understanding of the union between two other dimensions: historical and personal integration.

Until the Kingdom of God comes in its eschatological fullness, God's project of salvation history is accomplished by incorporating our actions and creative passions into it. We meet God in history. He moves ahead calling to us. If we want to grow in our relationship with God, we must keep going because God does not delay, going forward as one who inspires, invites and offers. History is in our hands, and God offers us precisely what we need to become ourselves. Our work is united to the work of God; our fragility is the weakness of God among us.

Involvement with the oppressed can threaten this personal integration offered to us by God. Hardships are not only a burden to our lifestyle which remains something external. The more difficult burden to handle is the variety of reactions that so much oppression unleashes within us. These reactions begin to rush forward like torrents, crashing against our inner foundations. They can cripple us or they can lead us to a life of dedicated service to God's Kingdom.

Today we meet many religious and lay Christians who have united a free and creative personality to the joy and patience (Mt. 5,12) that God gives in the midst of persecution. The roots of these persons and communities go deeper than short-term, easy successes, the start of a fashion or the psychological or ideological affinity between persons. The new person that is being formed through this journey is nourished as much by work as by contemplation. A "*wisdom*" is born that keeps on growing and begins to be shared with others.

Further on, we will attempt to describe at greater length how this process of personal integration in our meeting with God is lived in intimacy and in the active service of the Kingdom.



Meeting between traditional prayer and incarnated prayer

All the dimensions of traditional Church prayer can be found in prayer among the poor.

Seeking God. In following Jesus who is *the way*, we descend with him into the depths of human society. Here Jesus experiences God as the Source of all goodness. Precisely where society burdens and seems to destroy people, Jesus teaches us to call God, Father of goodness and nearness. To seek God, we must renounce everything, not only mystically but, insofar as is possible, historically. We must abandon ourselves to the One who is the absolute, precisely where oppression appears to negate His presence and goodness.

The desert is below and outside the city, where the system has been discarding those it considers inferior. In this exile, we want to be reborn as new, more evangelical persons, distancing ourselves from worldly values thanks to the proximity of the poor. By their open wounds they allow the Kingdom of God to enter into this world.

Here there is no **cloister** made of stones and doors, but a prison of structures. Behind this grating we are shut in with the poor. No cloister brings us nearer to God with such certainty as the alleys filled with the faces of the poor with whom God identifies. In their countless needs for love and liberty, we contemplate the spirit of God who has made the cry of the poor his own. In their goodness, patience and active hope, in this "furnace of iron" (Jer. 11,4), we must be purified from our egoism. The people agonize as in a gigantic "sepulcher." But this situation gives us a **paschal experience** of Jesus' death and resurrection, the center of our Christian life.



Contemplating the beauty of **creation** in the midst of an egocentric world, we embrace the **folly of the cross** as a concrete way of losing ourselves for the Kingdom of God, as an expression of the gift of self offered in our **religious vows**. So much pain and so much life do not fit into mechanical, repetitive rituals. We must allow ourselves to be open to the uncertainties of this passover which profoundly enriches the Church's **sacramental life**. We journey with the people of God without lessening our **religious identity**. Our vows, lived in a religious community, are a familiar and vulnerable sign of the Kingdom and of God's presence in our midst.

IV

The way of prayer

Unless our service is based on a deep and profound relationship with God, our work is salt that has lost its flavor (Matt. 5,13) and we become unbalanced. No one can set out in this desert of history, nor live the slow evolving of their work with the oppressed, without meeting God and being able to say along with Job in the midst of his descent into the depths of human suffering: *“Before, I knew you only by hearsay but now, I have seen you with my eyes;...”* (Job 42,4).

How do we become contemplative? How can we unite prayer and living so that our commitment become efficacious, and our being might reach its plenitude?

1. CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER

“But when you pray, go to your private room, shut yourself in and pray to your Father who is in that secret place”
(Matt. 6,6).

My uniqueness draws me to God

- Each of us needs a personal encounter with God. God does not approach us like a politician approaching a crowd of followers who are all dressed up in the party colors, waiting to take part in the campaign.

We are all unique beings; God has made each of us distinct. We are not duplicates each bearing a different serial number to distinguish us from the others. God's face is turned towards each of us. With the hands of an artist God molds us according to a creative love which never repeats itself. From the beginning each of us is a reflection of a new facet of God here on earth. But since we are neither simple paintings on a canvas nor fossils but rather living creatures, we can either be clay that rebels against the potter (Is. 45,9) or we can contribute to the work of God, bringing something irreplaceable to it.

- The sign of this birth always accompanies me. God continues to form me in relationship with him and I can live only in this *relationship*. Separated from it, I will wander about here and there drying up like a branch cut from a tree, blown by the wind from place to place. God's plans in history are accomplished through me. If I complete this plan I will reach my own creative fullness.

- In this relationship I can never say: I have arrived; an endless road stretches out before me. God is not only a distant horizon drawing me on but also lives within me as an inexhaustible fountain of suggestion, offering and inspiration... Thus by my creative work I prepare the future of God in history and, at the same time, the profundity of an intimacy that has called me by name since the mysterious emergence of my life. I am neither paralyzed within an intimacy without history nor emptied by a history without intimacy. This relationship with God brings about a meeting and an infinite project. I, too, am already infinite.

Bearing within me a solidarity with the poor, I enter into my room, lock the door and meet God. There I will experience, beyond unimaginable limits, the solitude of those who do not hold in their hands the keys to open the door of the senses and of the fullness for which they are made. Yet, in the midst of the divisions of the wayfarer, I will also experience the plenitude that unites everything.

There I will experience with surprising clarity my own identity that cannot be transferred to anyone else, since God does not absorb me, nor make me a glove on his hand. The Lord draws near to my



solitude from deep within me, but also from the distance of his unattainable transcendence. Thus this meeting opens up ever-new possibilities like a river of living water that flows from the center of my being.

- We can distinguish various types of personal prayer.

Vocal prayer is said with the lips and expressed in words. I can use my own prayers or those of another that express my being before God, and also speak to me of God. When I say "Our father" I do not only express my being a child of God, but God also expresses his parenthood to me.

Meditation is fundamentally done with the mind. By means of thoughts and images I arrive at a better understanding of God. I receive new light and I orient myself toward this enlightened bit of the journey.

In **contemplation**, my affectivity is impregnated with sentiments. Words and sentiments become simpler. The nearness of God's presence becomes the center of life, and the will welcomes and unites itself to the will of God.

All forms of personal prayer are oriented to and go towards contemplation, where all words, symbols and thoughts end, fading away before the luminous nearness of God. At times this nearness is obscure, but the night that is welcomed also brings its peace. For this reason, I would like to speak of contemplation by trying to describe this itinerary of a personal relationship with God.

The body of contemplation

- **Contemplation is an encounter**

Prayer is an encounter between God and me. As with all encounters between persons, it needs to be cultivated in the available time and space. Little by little we see the birth of words, sentiments, and images expressing the relationship. Times of quality silence also develop as communication starts to move beyond words.

The whole encounter is situated within the history of a relationship, so that each moment is marked by all its past. Nevertheless, it opens to the unpredictable and the new. I cannot foresee the initiatives of God, nor can I fully understand the dynamisms that are incubating within me. The relationship goes forward if I open myself unconditionally to God's initiative and to my own deep and naked truth. This encounter does not only engage part of me. From the depths of my being, I reach for an inexhaustible encounter, an infinite YOU. Sooner or later all other encounters will appear insignificant.

Nor does God accompany us for a short while on our journey only to leave us at the first fork in the road. God is the beginning and the end. On the horizon of this relationship we will find eschatological fullness.

Solidarity with the poor is a privileged expanse drawing us near to God, starting with the truth that is revealed about ourselves and about the action of God.

- *Communication with my whole being.*

We meet to communicate. I express myself before God and listen to God who manifests himself to me. I bring myself wholly to the meeting and God speaks to my whole person. I think in the presence of God, saying what I see clearly and what is hidden from me, what I ask and the elements of the answer that are already in my hands.

I express myself before God from the bottom of my heart where the great affections that fill my life are engendered. Inevitably I move in the direction that these affections have marked out. Behind my actions there are sentiments that show me the path to follow. My fantasies bring to light profound realities which are more or less disguised. They also permit me to define the traits of new possibilities that surge up within me and either fascinate or terrify me.

The body does not lie. If I learn to listen to it, it will tell me many truths about myself. In addition, it can transform itself wholly

into a word made flesh, into gestures that express all that I am and want to be. The body of Jesus collapsed on the ground of Gethsemane, thus expressing his anguish in the face of death, as well as his abandonment and availability to God's plan.

God manifests himself to me. Jesus is his definitive and insuperable Word. When I take the Gospel in hand, the Spirit within me translates it into a message especially for me taking into account the context in which I live. In any situation, I can cling to the hope that the Spirit will communicate a totally new message to me.

God also speaks to us through the many saints and prophets. Their commitment is revealed to us through signs of history. Our senses perceive creation like a faithful and permanent presence. Today, God speaks to us especially through the world's outcasts, who at times cry out in pain, calling to us. They are a hard reality that judges us, or a wisdom and commitment that save us.

The Word reaches us in numerous ways like a total communication. It not only addresses itself to our ears but reaches our whole being and leads us towards the center of our lives. We can see, touch, feel, hear and savor it. It moves, continues on its journey and leaves traces of its passage everywhere. We cannot contain it, nor fix it into our writings or our minds although it be as clear as the noonday sun. It can form an alliance with us, but it will never be our slave. It is faithful but will not necessarily live up to our expectations. It is efficacious but our calculations do not oblige it to follow the rhythm of our seasons and plans. It is directed to me in all my uniqueness but I cannot contain all its truth and grace. It is familiar and transparent, but comes buried in the clay of human reality.

To be able to listen fully to God, I have to develop all the contemplative capacities of my life, to allow the word God speaks to resound in the silence and thus reach the center like a word welcomed by the whole person. *"Something ... which we have heard, and seen with our own eyes, which we have watched and touched with our own hands, the Word of life — this is our theme"* (1John 1,1).

Developing our way of seeing reality is a slow process, because our sight is affected by all that we are. We easily say "*this is your God*" (Ex 32,4) to what is simply bright gold, blinding us and stopping us in the middle of our journey. For this reason we must reflect on the resistances we find in our communication with God.

● ***Our resistance to the encounter***

In all relationships between persons there are resistances. We all have our own territory and defend it from any stranger who draws near us. At times, God appears before us like a threat, like a stranger whom we do not wish to see because we want to go on living (Ex. 20,19).

We are like a castle, with its walls, moats, drawbridges, its permanent lookout towers and secret passages... We close ourselves in hermetically when someone seems to want to attack us or we open false passages that do not arrive at the heart of our being. We do not want to let go of what we experience as communion and nearness.

We close ourselves in when we see God as a "poor" person who will unsettle us, who is stronger than we are, and who can dominate us. This is a mystery which demands that we advance slowly in understanding a reality which is revealed to us only in its "hour." Moreover, what we hear can only be received if we are well disposed to receive it. What we welcome into our hearts, we organize according to our past experiences and our present expectations.

Thus we come to Moses struggling with God about accepting the exhortation to go to Egypt. They will not believe me; I don't know how to speak. The Pharaoh will not allow us to leave; send someone else. (cf. Ex. 3,10ff.) Jonah lies down to die and is angry because God does not act according to Jonah's way of thinking (Jonah 3,8). At times we feel that we are on solid ground and are afraid to go on to something new. We can also evade the encounter when we bury within us our so-called "evil" sentiments and do not express them. On other occasions, God seems too demanding, so we try to run away, but in reality, it is we who demand an impossible perfection from ourselves.

There are many names for these resistances and their symptoms are as varied as fear, obscurity, dryness, temptations, dispersion, boredom... When we are living among the oppressed, contemplation can be seen as a waste of time, of lesser importance than the urgencies of working for a people who live in a state of emergency. It can be seen as impossible because of the impact of the hard reality that invades our inner self, as an evasion towards worlds which soften reality and draw us away from it...

However, going through the stages of resistance is inevitable, and we must discern them. This passage also forms a part of the journey of prayer. At times it may be transformed into a true "struggle against death" but it is a passover towards a new fullness that will be attained.

● ***Unity in gratuity***

Through this process we go forward towards a deeper union with God. The Spirit enters into us like water into a sponge (Sp.Ex. 335). When we plunge the sponge into the water, shiny bubbles, fascinating and empty rise to the surface. The stage of resistance plunges us deeper and deeper into the mystery of God. Many vain aspects are taken out of our lives, leaving room for a fuller presence of God. We begin to allow God to be God within us. But God does not arrive like an invader who annihilates me and makes me a slave. Nor is God a fascination that absorbs me or an exigency of perfection that damages and destroys me.

God is communion, a presence in whom I can be fully myself and be loved as I am. I become aware of all that I am because God allows me to be myself, to feel that I am loved in all my fragmented reality. I accept myself as one who is growing. I don't pretend to be perfect, disguising my truth with deceit and rigidity. I welcome and integrate my person into this embrace that unites me to God in a dimension that is deeper than my dispersions and faults.

The word adoration may express this experience of communion lived as confidence and abandonment to the God of history. "*The Lord your God, shall you worship and him alone shall you serve*" (Matt. 4,10). It is an adoration that not only unites me and delivers me to the protected



milieu of silent contemplation but also to the world where the Kingdom of God is being built.

We can surrender ourselves only to God. We cannot adore idols (projects, ideologies, persons...) because they will take possession of us and enslave us in exchange for a pallid light, a “recognized” short-range efficiency or a security that pretends to protect us from the risks and obscurities of the creative journey towards the future.

Faced with the “unknowns” of God, and of the future... I affirm a deeper knowledge: my personal mystery and that of history are established in God, Source of goodness, inexhaustible origin of new possibilities. The mystery is no longer simply obscure and without sense; it is rather the gestation of a secret and unknown future that will appear in its time. The Kingdom of God is sown in our land; in its time it will bud and reach the fullness of the harvest (Mark 4, 26-29).

To allow God to be God in all his mystery is to still our words and our plans and to impose a grateful silence upon ourselves. Here "others" will find a space where they can be themselves in all their uniqueness, without becoming imprisoned in communion, nor being rejected because they are threatening or different. Neither will they be esteemed perfect, without conflicts. In the measure in which I allow God to be God in contemplative silence, I also allow others to be themselves and, ultimately, I, too, can be myself.

The adoration of the Lord of history is an experience of gratuity. I receive something that I can neither cause nor demand. The gifts of God, such as love, pardon, friendship..., basic aspects of life, cannot be claimed. In contemplative silence I welcome the nearness of God, and freely offer myself to him. I offer God the gift of my life. I will not act like an investor who sees everything as an investment or of a backer who hopes to make a profit. Not only will I give my words, my time and my activities, I will give my whole being. To give freely what I have freely received involves my whole person. Adoration reaches the deepest corners of my heart, where I cannot enter simply through reflection or awareness. It frees me from fear and from the avarice which stops me from offering my life with all that it contains of confidence and of joyful sharing.

In the depths of society, in the tombs of oppression, the mystery of God and his plans can become disturbingly obscure. This is another reason that we need to experience that adoration where God becomes more and more God in me, I become more and more myself in God, and through me, God enters more and more into our world.

In the depths of oppression, we also meet many persons who freely give all that they have received in the service of life and of the Kingdom. How can we explain their gratuity and their happiness? Beyond all explanation, these poor, with their quiet simplicity, offer us the grace of grateful contemplation.

Contemplation of a prophet

- The prophet Jeremiah prayed with all the strength of his commitment to eliminate injustice and idolatry, and to establish justice and law (cf. Jer.20,7-13). He passes a particularly difficult moment. The people want to denounce him and even those who had been his friends are waiting for him to make a mistake so that they can break away from him. He feels as if he is the people's buffoon. All make fun of him (Jer.20,1).

His mission brings him into a deep and growing solitude. *"I never sat in the company of scoffers, amusing myself, with your hands on me I held myself aloof since you had filled me with indignation"* (15,17). Overwhelmed by the weight of the situation, not trying to evade it, to leave it at the door of prayer, or to hide it behind his words and thoughts, Jeremiah seeks to have a totally sincere encounter with God.

- Jeremiah is completely bewildered. He expresses his feelings to God. *"When your words came I devoured them: your word was my delight and the joy of my heart"* (15,16).

Now Jeremiah expresses all his anguish with a harsh language that almost borders on blasphemy. You *"have seduced me, Yabweh, ... you have overpowered me... you were the stronger"* (Jer. 20,7). In absolute liberty he pours out his heart before God, without mincing words, nor hiding his sentiments. And he makes a decision: *"I will not think about him, I will not speak in his name any more"* (20,9).

But God who probes hearts, does not seem scandalized by Jeremiah's words. Jeremiah is expressing what he really feels, what God has already seen in his heart. God communicates with Jeremiah, and makes him feel *"a fire burning in his heart"* (20,9). The word that Jeremiah has *"eaten"* and that he knows well, now burns like a fire that cannot be extinguished. The author of the Apocalypse (10,9-11) also eats the book of the Word. Although it has the taste of honey in the mouth, still, it turns his stomach sour because harsh is the word that arises in his heart against peoples and nations.

Fire is the sign of the active presence of God and can even be perceived in a corporeal way. Fire burns and causes suffering, but it

also gives light and heat. From the depths of Jeremiah's bones blazes a fire that does not allow him to be a prisoner of his bitterness and of his decision to abandon his mission. It is this fire that forges a new word of God on the lips of the prophet.

- A true battle is fought between the deception of Jeremiah and the presence of God. Jeremiah makes great efforts to contain this fire and this word which is being born in him, but he can do nothing (Jer. 20,9). With his whole being he resists the fire. Is it his fear of a new deception or is it an aversion to the difficulty of his mission?

Earlier, in a similar situation, Jeremiah compares God to a *"deceptive stream with inconstant waters."* But God tries to awaken in him a deeper confidence than before: *"If you come back, I will take you back into my service."* That will purify him so that a true word will be born in him, one *"without dross"* and he will become the *"mouth"* of God (15,18-19).

- The bitterness of the word and the fire rooted in his bones open the way towards a deeper communion with God, toward a new way of experiencing the mysterious and astonishing fidelity of God. *"Yahweh is at my side"* (Jer. 20,10). This is a language of communion. Through this passover, his vocation of prophet takes on new consistency. His enemies *"will stumble, vanquished"* (20,11). On another occasion, he also feels like *"a fortified wall of bronze"* whose enemies are helpless before him (Jer. 15,20-21).

The external situation within society has not changed but it has been transformed interiorly by the spiritual battle with God. A new understanding of the mystery of God is born. Communion exists precisely there where Jeremiah sees only deception and disloyalty on the part of God. Thus, at the end of this encounter we are all invited to sing and to praise (Jer. 20,13).

This is an experience of communion in the midst of suffering. We do not only meet God in beauty, in order and in success. God's transcendence can overcome the most desperate situation. To recognize and acknowledge it in a contemplation that praises and sings permits us to unify our interior divisions and to bind up our wounds. This brings about the birth of a new and stronger commitment.

2. THE PRAYER OF DISCERNMENT

Live as children of light, for light produces every kind of goodness and righteousness and truth. Try to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the fruitless works of darkness; rather expose them... (Eph. 5,8-11)

To discern in the grand theater of the world

- The truth of contemplation is expressed in its surrender to God's plan in history. What is new today in the action of God? What is my "just and precise" collaboration with the newness of God?

"Behold I come to do your will" (Heb. 10,9). This phrase sums up the profound attitude of Jesus towards the Father as well as the disposition of all who pray for discernment. Discernment is neither an exercise of introspection nor an attempt to fulfill the expectations of others or even our own expectations. It is rather an intense form of prayer in which we strive to discover what God knows that we need (cf. Matt. 6,8).

- Recognizing which of our interior impulses are from God and which are not presupposes an intense relationship with the world where God is building his Kingdom, as well as a good knowledge of ourselves.

Discernment also takes on an ecclesial dimension, permitting us to draw near to the Church, above all, to those who serve as authority, which I then discover as the will of God.

- The domain of the poor is a privileged place for discernment. We can compare society to a theater. The whole production is set up to be observed from an orchestra seat and from exclusive theater boxes. People are comfortably seated in an air-conditioned atmosphere; the penumbra makes the play of lights on the stage more dazzling. The spectator is led to a seat, and thence, watching the scene, is conditioned to give approval and to applaud with the other spectators. Those who direct the production employ smiling workers to guide you to your place so you see what they want you to see from where they want you to see it.



But anyone entering by the service entrance instead of through the main entrance transgresses the rules of the game and will discover a different production. The artists' faces are tense as they wait to perform. The workers are tired of always offering the same representation, and of being the ones who must prepare the production for people who are so comfortably seated. Seen from behind, the decorations are ugly and false; the clothes do not have the same glitter.

Society can be looked at either from the orchestra seats and the theater boxes, or from the service entrances of this world where we meet the workers who do not go out on the stage yet make the production possible. Where do we stand in the grand theater of the world? Our position will completely change our point of view. Expulsion from a favela can seem like a step forward to those who plan and direct, and like an aggression to those who lose everything. When discerning it is crucial to know where we are situated, and where our solidarity lies.

- Many would find it audacious and foolish to say that, for us today, salvation comes forth from those who work behind the scenes, from the world's poor. However, this is what happened when the newness of Christianity entered this world through the open doors of the poor on Pentecost morning. Peter tells the Jews: "*These people are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: 'It will come to pass in the last days, God says, that I will pour out a portion of my spirit upon all flesh. Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy'*" (Acts 2,15-17).

- However, when we are dealing with marginality, the newness comes from below; this is absolutely unforeseeable. It is born from something which has neither knowledge nor technicians, neither the power of authority nor the funds of those who control ideas and markets. That's why it escapes planning and projects.

- This discovery forces us to look at things in a new way. We cannot only look up, nor look into our own inner being "enlightened" by contemplation. We also must look down, down into the whole of society.

- We contemplate, welcome and place ourselves at the service of what is born here below when we discover that it is a passageway to the Kingdom of God. We help to purify it of its ambiguities; we help it to grow and to continue beyond our own ability to accompany it.

- If God appoints us to be "*sentinel*," to see reality and denounce "*to the wicked their evil ways*" because he wants them to "*change their ways and save their lives*" (Ez 33,7-11), then the nearness of the oppressed is a privileged place.

The discernment process

● *A generous opening*

Discernment is the bridge between contemplation and the active life where the Kingdom of God is constructed. The basic attitudes of discernment are acquired in contemplation. First, the person must be “solely” and “purely” (Sp.Ex. 23) directed towards God — the unique pole that draws and unifies all one’s energies.

Secondly, there must be generosity, one must embrace what most contributes to bringing about God’s plan. It is not a matter of accomplishing heroic acts, but of doing what God asks of us without becoming prisoners of fear nor being carried along by obscure cupidities. Paul summarizes this aspect when he says that insofar as this love grows “*more and more in knowledge and in every kind of perception*” we can “*discern what is of value*” for “*the glory and praise of God*” (Phil. 1,9-11).

In the letter to the Romans, after revealing God’s plan of salvation for the Jews and the pagans, Paul exclaims in admiration: “*Oh, the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!*” “*For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen*” (Rom. 11,33). This is a cry of admiration from a person contemplating God’s plans across the centuries. It is a contemplation that awakens love and surrender. “*I urge you then... by the mercies of God to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God*” (Rom. 12,1).

Paul realizes that the design of God is mysterious. “*Who has known the mind of the Lord or who has been his counselor?*” (Rom. 11,34). But if we receive the goodness of God and do not “*conform ... to this age*” (12,2), namely, not live the drama from luxurious theater boxes, nor according to the values of the directors of this world, then we will be “*transformed by the renewal of your mind*” according to the gospel, and we will be able to “*discern what is the will of God, what is good, and pleasing and perfect*” (Rom. 12,2).

Thus, without letting ourselves be imprisoned by fear, nor carried along by our imagination, but receiving what God gives us “*each*

according to the measure of faith that God has apportioned" (Rom. 12,3), we will be able to occupy the post prepared for us in the "body" (Rom. 12,4) to which we belong, where each has a different, unique and irreplaceable function.

- ***The awareness of a vigilant spirit***

We must seek the will of God. We must test our inspirations "to see whether they belong to God" (1 John 4,1).

Although the ways of God are as far from us as heaven is from earth (cf. Is. 55,9), nevertheless God's plans are revealed to us at each moment of history (cf. Eph. 1,9). Throughout the New Testament, we are invited to be vigilant in order not to be surprised by God's arriving while we are asleep. We must be aware of what is happening in the world as well as in ourselves. *This is essential if we are to discern the work of the Father here below.*

- **What is the new action of God today in our history?** Jesus reproaches the Jews for being experts in knowing the signs of nature — they know if it is going to rain or if the sun will come out - but for being incapable of discovering the signs of the Kingdom that he has carried out before all peoples (Luke 12,54-56).

Today there are also signs of the renewal that God is bringing about in the midst of the old. Constantly and tangibly, Jesus points out the moment and the event marking the coming of the Kingdom of God. *"Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing,"* (Luke 4,21) Jesus says in the synagogue of Nazareth.

- **What exactly is God asking of me?** Many people "know" what must be done. Ideologists and technicians are tempted to decide for the rest of us. People also have expectations, at times realistic and evangelical, and at times excessive. We cannot, for any reason, take part in the game of reacting according to the impossible expectations of others. If we respond to people's problems according to our own limitations, we can disappoint them. The dramatic aspects of some emergency situations can unloose energies within us that do not respect our

reality and lead us off the track. Jesus disappointed the people and at times disconcerted them. He calls Peter "Satan" because he wants to lead Jesus along the path of the world and not along that of the Father.

God is the only one who totally respects me as I am, knowing me and loving me as I am in all the reality of my being. His will is an offer of grace that enables me to do what is asked of me. I must respond to him alone. God's will can frustrate my own expectations, as well as those of the oppressed or of the technicians.

- **What impulses act in me and where do they lead me?** A series of impulses (thoughts, sentiments, states of soul...) boil within me, and I must discern which come from God and which come from Satan. At times, it is easy to see the difference. At other times, these impulses enter our homes disguised in the robes of "*an angel of light*" (2 Cor. 11,4). The enemy is "*a liar and the father of lies*" because he wants to "*reduce to slavery and murder*" (John 8,31-59).

I must "become aware" of the energies that animate my body and my spirit, in order to distinguish between those that oppress me and those that liberate me, thus committing myself to the will of God. This means that I cannot disconnect myself from my being, allowing subterranean currents to carry me where I don't want to go. By means of a lucid and permanent examen of my relationship with God in my life and prayer, I will be more and more disposed to say like Jesus: "*No one takes it [my life] from me but I lay it down on my own*" (John 10,18) when my "hour" comes according to God's plans.

- ***The decision requires freedom***

If we become more and more aware of our freedom, we can accept our personal reality and choose our journey. Here we find the "decision," the expression of our freedom. This decision has a painful aspect: when I choose one way I eliminate the others. It also has a joyful side: I choose what I see as the will of God, a way that leads to life.

There are also "small decisions" that we make quite often, almost without being aware of them. If we see each as a decision isolated

from the total process, then they will not contain much of the transcendent. Like the small movements of the rudder when we are on a long voyage, they must be seen within the "big decisions" which mark the direction of my life. They are few but nonetheless decisive. Within these large decisions, the little ones help us to stay on course as we struggle through the currents that crash against the boat and seek to take possession of its destiny.

Some decisions go "towards the exterior;" they imply an apostolic project. Others go "towards the interior" and remain hidden. Both are necessary. Within me are currents running in all directions. I must choose the thoughts and sentiments that build me up, and channel the destructive forces.

External situations cannot always be changed according to our desires, and some interior limitations enter us like Paul's thorn in the flesh, without our being able to pull them out. I can face these limitations either in a destructive or a creative way. I can live them as a captivity that destroys me or I can choose thoughts and sentiments that stop me from being enslaved to them and that, within the obscurity of my prison, enable new life to mature within me, one that springs forth into light when its hour has come.

● *A decision confirmed*

My decisions carry weight only when they are confirmed as God's will, when they comply with God's plans. This last step of discernment is important because it heals the lacerations caused by all important decisions and gives them the harmony that is attained through the interior peace that comes only from the Spirit. When Jesus is baptized in the midst of the people, he commits himself to the impending Kingdom announced by John the Baptist. Later, while in prayer, Jesus experiences the nearness of the Father who calls Jesus "my well-beloved Son," (Luke 3,22) thus confirming Jesus in his decision.

Mark situates the Transfiguration of Jesus after the decision to go up to Jerusalem to confront the Jewish institutions and to bear wit-

ness to the Kingdom right up to the moment of his death (Mark 9,2). Jesus turns aside from the journey towards Jerusalem, climbs the mountain and once again is confirmed: "*This is my beloved Son. Listen to him*" (Mark 9,2). Jesus is confirmed and fortified, and the disciples, who do not understand Jesus' option, are invited to enter into the mystery of this journey which will end in the cross and upset all their expectations.

When we are confirmed, we somehow experience God making an alliance with us, an alliance that we choose because God first chose us. We can only radically commit our lives to the big choices through this experience of encounter.

The interior criteria of this confirmation is deep peace and lucidity. When it remains, especially after important decisions, it is a sign that the decision respects my personal reality as God respects it. Church authority is the external criteria of confirmation. In order for their discernment to be evangelical and valid, authority must focus on serving the Kingdom of God, accompanying in fraternal and cordial nearness the steps of those who seek ecclesial confirmation.

On the other hand, our decisions are permeated with our personal ambiguities. God confirms these decisions, but only as one step in our journey, as a freedom open to new and deeper liberating purifications. We are not brand new vessels ready to hold the new wine of the Kingdom. This assertion should make us humble and available, without fanaticism nor rigidity. Our new and profound peace is rooted in this God who chooses us as we are: wayfarers moving towards plenitude.

The new options that spring up among the poor always seem to meet with contradiction at the hands of the powerful, whose strength and organizations menace them. These infiltrate their innermost being thanks to the thousand and one mechanisms of their seducing, lying publicity. Thus, we see the need to be grounded in vigilance and the strength of discernment according to the Spirit.

Jesus' prayer of discernment

- ***At his baptism by John, Jesus surrendered himself to the Kingdom of God.***

But how did he proceed? How did Jesus fit into the plan of the people with their expectations of abundance, into the plan of the priests who hope that the Messiah will manifest himself in the Temple with overwhelming power, and into the plan of the armed liberation movements?

In the solitude of prayer and of the desert, Jesus is tempted as he will be later in his apostolic life among the people who follow him because he feeds them (John 6,26), who demand signs in order to believe (Mark 8,11), who want to crown him as king (John 6,15), or through Peter, whom Christ explicitly calls "Satan" (Mark 8,33) etc. Jesus is fully open not only to God, but also to the situation of the people in all their misery, and to the various currents that in their own way, need to be resolved.

- ***The tempter offers Jesus different possibilities for reaching the Kingdom.***

Jesus does not want a messianism that reduces persons to being merely consumers of bread. We need a word of God that calls us by name, that gives us back our dignity as mediators for God, enabling us to stand on our own two feet, leading us to accept the work needed to earn our daily bread and to share it with others. People cannot be compared to permanent cripples who sit in a corner begging a piece of bread. Although oppressed, they are able to create and share.

Neither does Jesus throw himself down from the temple fascinating others with prodigies. Instead of seducing people with marvelous deeds, He prefers to approach people face to face, in the squares and in the streets, in the limitations and nearness of human relationships. The prodigies are experienced by the marginalized people who are ready to welcome the Kingdom. The lame will walk, and the lepers

will be healed as a result of their faith and as an expression of the Kingdom's liberating power, which reaches us as Jesus, poor and vulnerable, approaches us.

He will not seek the power of political domination. He prefers to serve. Thus, to the confusion of the people and of his disciples, He will go up to Jerusalem in fidelity to the Kingdom, making himself a poor servant trapped by the forces of power. The way of Jesus is completely new: neither to reduce, seduce, nor dominate the liberty of the others. Only to serve.

By making this decision, Jesus chooses a way that responds to the true needs of the people although it tends to contradict their expectations.

Jesus lives according to the prophecy of Isaiah: as true servant of the people and of the Father. He is tempted because this way, whose efficacy He is not able to verify in history, traverses moments of darkness. While Jesus moves towards the end of his life, he sinks into a solitude as black as night. It is the moment in which his faith, looking beyond the evidence, is converted into fidelity to the Father.

The evangelist Matthew (4,11) tells us that once Jesus made this decision "*...the devil left him and, behold, the angels came and ministered to him.*" Here Matthew wants to express the nearness of God confirming the way of Jesus and bringing him a spirit of peace and harmony.

3. CONTEMPLATION IN ACTION

*My Father is at work until now, so I am at work. (John 5,17)
...the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he
sees his Father doing; because whatever the Father does the
Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows Him
all he does. (John 5,19-20).*

Working with the Father

- Meeting God in contemplative intimacy does not mean being submerged in an ocean of passivity nor invaded by nostalgia. Meeting God recreates us. We experience God as the one who liberates us in communion so we will be capable of discovering and welcoming the newness that God brings about through us in history.

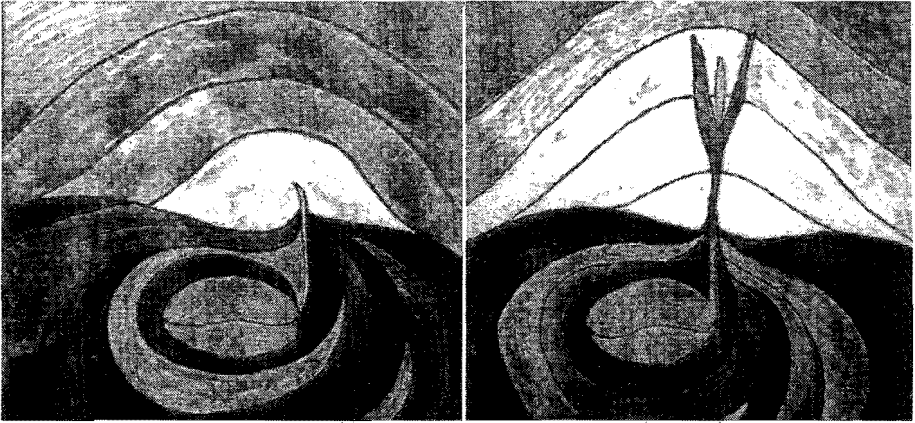
- God not only listens to the cry of those oppressed by external structures and by the many mechanisms that have already penetrated them and caused them to be physically oppressed even from within. God cries out within the poor (Rom. 8,26) and makes their cry his own.

- This cry is similar to that of the woman going through childbirth. Isaiah audaciously has God saying that he has been "*groaning like a woman in labor, panting and gasping for air...*" (42,14). The fruit that comes forth is the light that shines on the new roads of a blind people.

Besides the image of childbirth, which explains the creative force of God in history, we find an image that Isaiah takes from plant-life: the justice of God is sowed in history like the seed in the earth. For this reason God commands: "*Let the earth open wide, let salvation spring up, let righteousness grow with it; I, the Lord have created it*" (Isaiah 45,8).

Jesus himself uses this image. The Kingdom of God is like a seed scattered on the land. It sprouts and reaches its fullness without anyone knowing how (Mark 4,27). Even more, Jesus uses this image about himself like the seed falling on the fertile ground of history to bear much fruit (John 12,24).

- The Lord of history invites us to work with him but not simply as those who carry out exterior acts. The gifts of God are born within us;



they set in motion our imaginations and our hands. They come to light marked by our own unique traits.

- In working with God, we too become creators, and we feel freedom and justice pass through our being. At the same time, we feel more committed to go on creating, because something of ourselves is moving into history.
- The whole creative process is a passover; all childbirth is painful. Each new life is born to be unique and in the measure in which it grows, it moves away from us, taking its own road, just as a growing plant moves away from the seed, which ends up by disappearing into the earth.

Among the poor, the new is born under the threat of the monster of oppression with its thousand open mouths (Apoc 12,4). The painful delivery and the earth that cracks to allow the new plant to be born are images of pain, but also of new life that moves towards the fullness of the Kingdom.

- In creating with God, we live new experiences. God suffers and works with and in us to liberate us. Any street can become a temple and every step can be a gesture of worship. *"offer your bodies...; that is the kind of worship for you"* (Rom. 12,1).

How can we proceed in this encounter with God
who calls us to contemplation in action?

The steps of contemplation in action

● *Enter into the plan of God*

The work of God becomes tangible in projects which liberate all persons and the whole person. In extreme cases, the poor appear in the gospel as persons to whom we must bring assistance, as in the case of the Samaritan who helped the Jewish man who lay wounded on the roadside.

But in the majority of cases, the marginalized are shown in a different way. To them and to all who are in solidarity with them a vocation is revealed. They are not the eternal beggars on the roadside of history, hoping for the generosity of those who are knowledgeable, who have possessions and who are able to act. In the sermon on the mount, the marginalized are called to build the Kingdom of God.

Through the wounds of their poverty, which makes their present situation unstable, they allow the Kingdom of God to enter into this world. Presently, theirs "is" the Kingdom of God (Mt. 5,3), but the fullness of justice, of peace, of the possession of the land... will be in the future, as we read in the other beatitudes. Between the present and the future there opens the space and time where their vocation will be to create with God.

We must create a new relationship with our brothers and sisters (Mt. 5,21-48). Learning to love all, including our enemies, (Mt. 5,44-45) like the Father who causes rain to fall upon the just and the unjust, we can avoid entering into the dynamics of aggression, into giving an eye for an eye (Mt. 5, 39), deceit for falsehood (Mt. 5,37), insult for offense, (Mt. 5,22)... Allowing God's creative love to enter into us enables us to cut off the spiral of aggression and, by not nourishing it more, to create a new dynamism of life.

To make this possible, it is not enough to have a formal relationship with God, to simply carry out exercises of piety (Mt. 6,1-18), to

acquire a good reputation as a holy person, or to tell God what should be done. God is different. He is the Father of goodness and of nearness, a One who is hidden. In the secret of the heart, God offers the life of the Kingdom to all who approach with confidence and with the openness of the poor.

Such an encounter with God can bring about a new relationship with the goods of the earth (Mt. 6, 19-34). Wealth will no longer be an inflexible master who ends up by making us slaves, eternal beggars. We will rather serve the Kingdom of God and his justice, which brings with it all that is needed to live in dignity.

This is the gift offered to us. Those who receive it, who carry it out in their actions and plans will "*enter through the narrow gate*" which leads to life (Mt. 7,13-14). They will "*bear good fruit,*" (Mt. 7,15-20) and they will not simply say: "*Lord, Lord*" (Mt. 7,21-23). However, when people are caught up in a situation of oppression, this narrow gate can prove to be really inaccessible.

A new coherence is being established within those who are constructing the new Kingdom with God; they are like the house built on a rock (Matt. 7,24-27). The winds and the rain of the servants of the "god-money" rage against it but they cannot knock it down. Moreover, they will know joy in the midst of persecution.

Through the commitment of communities, God enters into us with new life. In history, we hide the discreet love of God. We are God's weakness and God's strength.

● ***Recognizing God's passing***

The aim of the contemplative, who is actively committed to the Kingdom, is "*to seek and find God in all things.*" This God who "*is hidden*" from the world (Is. 45,15) can be sought and found in the most secular and hostile places.

To keep moving forward in this revelation, we must commit

ourselves, first of all, to what discernment has shown us to be God's work, done with our collaboration.

On some occasions, we become aware of what we are living in our work and in our actions. We are surprised by God's manifestations. Stars do not always appear over babies born in poverty. But the fact that a star stopped above one baby... is enough to cause us to stop in the presence of other babies, trying to discover all the mystery of their being. We can recall the example of Jesus when the disciples come back from preaching. At this moment, all becomes clear to him, and he is filled with joy to see how the works of God are revealed to the simple people and hidden from the learned and the clever. Exulting with joy in the midst of his disciples, He gives thanks to the Father (Luke 10,21).

Frequently, it will be after an action, when we look at it in the daily "examen," or after a longer period of time, that the action of God will become manifest to us as He calms the waters. Then we will begin to see clearly what is behind a work or a meeting. Like the disciples of Emmaus, we will have to ask: "*Were not our hearts burning within us while he spoke to us on the way?*" (Luke 24,32). Some acts reveal the grandeur that is within them only after we ponder them in our hearts as Mary did (Luke 2,51).

It is not important that events bring success or failure. It is in the efficacy of love, of committed persons, of associations which create a place for community and works of justice, sharing their bread with the hungry... that "*your light will blaze out like the dawn,*" and that God will say: "*Here I am*" (Is. 58,8). It is precisely in the liberating action that "*your light will rise in the darkness and your darkest hour will be like noon*" (Is. 58,10). In other words, in God's action we feel his radiant presence.

However, God causes something new to break forth (Is. 43,18) even in the slowness and obscurity of the liberation process, in our comings and goings along difficult and familiar roads.

In the midst of poverty and human limitations, in a detail which passes unnoticed among the splendor and glitter of the spectacular, the



greatness of God can appear in a widow who "*has offered her whole livelihood*" (Luke 21,4). But only if we look at things with a contemplative view as Jesus did.

This recognition concerns individuals: the widow, the stranger, the union leader, the catechist, the family who shares their faith and friendship with us. As they come to meet us, they all occupy a concrete role in our journey along the blind alleys of misery. They can demolish our aggressive and destructive energies (Acts 9,4); they can explain to us the sense of Scripture (Luke 24,7), or they can be the "spirits" who as they draw near, show us the countenance of the Risen Lord (Luke 24,37).

When we meet persons in whom we recognize the active presence of God, they give us a message. It is not necessary to be thinking of God at that moment. God is already a felt presence in all that is visible. In an unidentified way, we receive an experience and a salvation. We are unable to explain how it can reach so deeply into our being. It is not necessary to think; it is enough to meet one another, to work, to embrace with open hearts the desire to contemplate and receive the presence of the Risen Lord.

● *The biddeness of God*

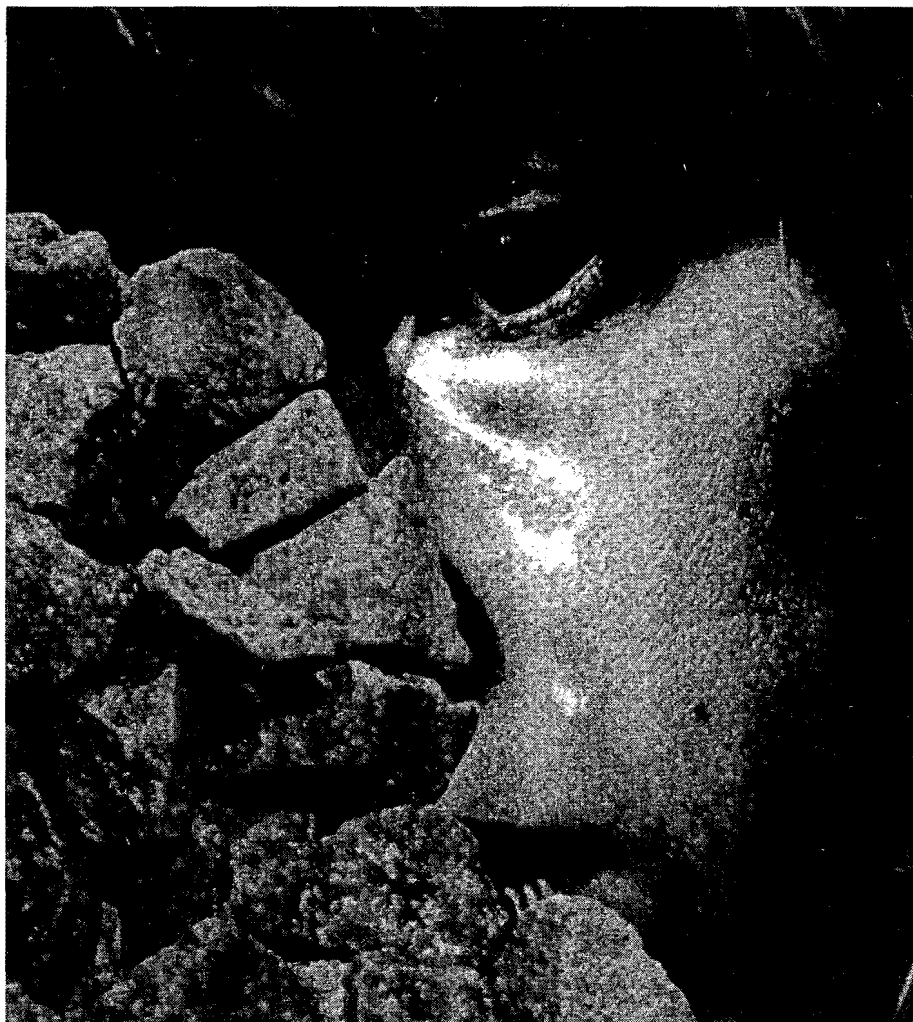
It is not always easy to discover the work of God in persons or in history. Falling from a privileged position to the depths of human society, Job, in his suffering, becomes more sensitive than ever before to the oppression of his companions in misery (Job 24,1-12). The wicked move boundary-markers; they steal, pushing the needy out of the way; they take the children of the poor as security and use them as slaves. The destitute must keep out of sight: they search for food among the garbage and the rubbish; they have no clothes to protect them from the cold, they snuggle against the rocks because they have no homes. They cultivate food for others while they themselves go hungry.

Before this spectacle, God seems silent, unmoving. It is the silence of God before the suffering of the just. What is God doing? Doesn't He see what is happening? Where is God's power?

When the people become conscious of their own worth they organize, they become committed, they begin to go forward. But on many occasions the repression also becomes stronger and more organized than before. That was the experience of the Jews in the desert. Starving in the midst of their new hardships, they dream of the food they ate when they were slaves in Egypt. They think that they have left Egypt to die scorched by the sun, and that they were better off before.

Their experience shows how different power groups can join together to create an iron circle, a perfectly sealed wall through which no one can enter: an oppressive social system. The prophet Micah expresses the situation of his time with powerful words. The large landowners imprison the poor and divide their lands, (Mic. 2,4). The authorities live off the people stripping the flesh from their bones (Mic. 3,2), the prophets tell fortunes for money (Mic. 3,11), the judges take bribes for their verdicts, and the priests take a fee for their rulings (Mic. 3,11). All the influential groups have created a system that does not permit the poor to rise towards the future.

Entire populaces cry from the cross like Jesus: *My God, my God why have you forsaken me?* Nothing seems to respond to this cry except the mockery of those well protected by their idols.



In these situations, the possibility of contemplating God's work becomes trusting fidelity, and patience, until we arrive at the "hour" when we are able to see the cross as a sign of glory (John 12,28). During this time, we are in anguish as Jesus was (John 12,27), faced with the baptism of blood that is before us. But God's response has already been sowed in silence, in the people's capacity for patience and fidelity to God's plans.

● *When clay becomes transparent*

Through the creative work we share with God and our fidelity to the passion, a profound transformation takes place in us. Reality becomes transparent, and in our depths we discover the active presence of the risen Christ. In the deeper sense of the word, the "clay" is converted into a place of contemplation. One of Paul's texts can help us to understand this experience (2 Cor. 4,5-12).

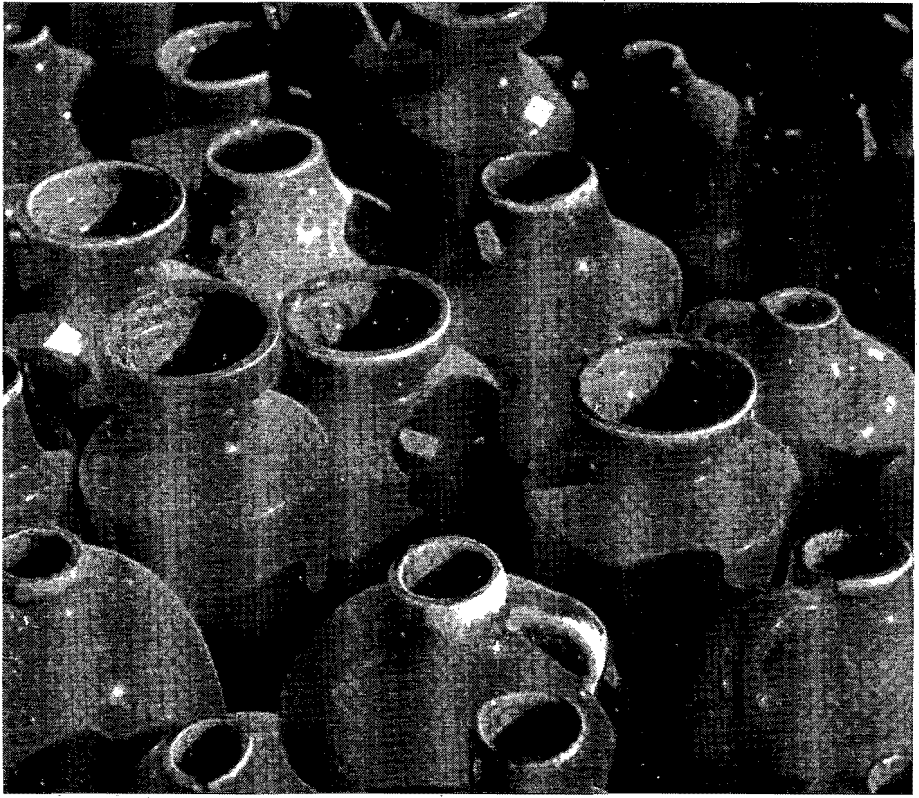
God's light has shone into our hearts (2 Cor. 4,6) "*but we hold this treasure in pots of earthenware so that the immensity of the power is God's and not our own*" (2 Cor. 4,7). Looking at the deteriorating bodies of the poor, we understand the significance of God's goodness being enclosed in fragile vessels of clay. Thus, it is an overwhelming experience to see God's action through the weak flesh of the poor, maltreated like old, cracked vessels of clay.

Let us place on the lips of today's oppressed, the words of Paul, so often persecuted and beaten. "*We are subjected to every kind of hardship, but never distressed; we see no way out but we never despair; we are pursued but never cut off; knocked down but still have some life in us; always we carry with us in our body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus, too, may be visible in our body*" (2 Cor. 4,8-10).

In their faithfulness to life, in the search for freedom and justice, in their sense of dignity, in the goodness and tenderness which has conquered scorn and blows, in their protests... we discover the treasure of the life of the Spirit which shines "*in our mortal flesh*" (2 Cor. 4,11).

Consequently, "*from now onwards, then, we will not consider anyone by human standards*" (5,16) but rather as a "*new creation*" (5,17) created by the Risen Lord within this "*new humanity*."

When we speak of transparency, we mean that we see through something, although not clearly; there is an interference. The presence of God is revealed to us through fragile and ambiguous clay. Persons are signs of the Kingdom, and through all our senses, they transmit a grace to us, one that goes far beyond our understanding. Reality is inhabited. We evolve in the world "*with the perception of a presence*" as P. Nadal says when speaking of St. Ignatius of Loyola.



This transparency is of great importance for us because we have to work and live in a contradictory and fragile milieu, where many forces shake us and absorb us. Transparency unifies us in the very dispersion of our work.

We are unified from within, insofar as our whole being is already centered on and oriented towards the only thing that matters: the discovery of God's will. But we are also unified from without, insofar as we become contemplative and discover the work of the only Lord of history among the most diverse and contradictory realities. This work is the same and moves all reality in the same direction. We can be progressively united and affirmed in our work with the poor, even though the disintegrating mechanisms of oppression weigh heavily upon us.

The prayer of Jesus in the midst of life

Luke's gospel (10,21-24) presents us with a prayer of Jesus in the midst of his apostolic commitment.

"Just at this time, filled with joy by the Holy Spirit, he said..." (Luke 10,21). This "time" is the return of the disciples from their apostolic mission. They had announced the Kingdom of God to the people of the villages, going up hill and down dale, and *"even the devils submit to them."*

Midway through his mission, Jesus realized that there were two groups opposed to the Kingdom. On the one hand, Scripture scholars and religious who protected themselves from the newness of the Kingdom by hiding behind their science and their religious practices. On the other hand, those who were well-off economically and who were firmly established in their riches.

However, the Kingdom enters into this world through *"these little ones"* because the God reveals himself to them and they accept this revelation. The apostolic work of Jesus and of his apostles was necessary to experience this.

Jesus recognizes the work of God and, filled with joy, gives thanks with a prayer born from the circumstances of this apostolic work.

The disciples' limitations have not disappeared. They are manifested later, in all their bluntness and will hide the Kingdom rather than reveal it. For Jesus, these "vessels of clay" have become transparent.

In the midst of the journey, these guiding signs show us the absolute surrender of Jesus to the Father's will. Apostolic action is the point where the intention of Jesus and the action of the Father meet in flawless unity. For Jesus, the action is not only the place where he transmits all he knows of the Father and of the Kingdom, but also where he contemplates the Father's action and where he gives himself in absolute gratuity.



4. COMMUNITY CELEBRATION

Do this in memory of me. (Luke 22,19)

Sing psalms and hymns and inspired song among yourselves, singing and chanting to the Lord in your hearts, always and everywhere giving thanks to God who is our Father... (Eph. 5,19-20)

The community is called to celebrate.

- Christian community is born in a commitment to the Kingdom. A fundamental dimension of community life is celebrating our whole life in faith. I have found the most joyful and most generous celebrations in the midst of the greatest affliction. How is this possible?

- From the first pages of the Gospel we see how the personality of Jesus generates a communitarian process. First, Jesus meets real persons within a friendly relationship (John 1,35-51). Later, he goes to their places of work — *“as he was walking along the lake”* (Mark 1,16) — where he calls Peter, Andrew, James, John and Matthew. Even later, he goes up *“a mountain”* (Mark 3,13) from where he contemplates the peoples’ activities and the commerce taking place on the shore of the lake. Here an immense crowd coming from all of Palestine, weighed down by their sufferings, come to Jesus seeking his help (Mark 3,8-12). Seeing the vast throng, Jesus calls the twelve apostles and forms them into a special group *“to be his companions and to be sent out to proclaim the message”* (Mark 3,14). Finally, this community of life and mission is transformed into a community with a destiny. Jesus goes up to Jerusalem to announce the Kingdom. It will cost him his life. The disciple who opposes this event is called *“Satan”* (Mark 8,33). The true disciple carries his cross and follows Jesus (Mark 8,34).

After the resurrection, the disciples receive the Spirit and create the Christian community. Jesus did not give them many instructions about the details of this community. The Spirit will teach them what to do, awakening in them unlimited creativity. It is in this dynamism of the Spirit that Christian communities now exist.

- At the celebration of the last supper the work of Jesus is given its focus. The twelve apostles, as leaders of the new people, are united around the table with Jesus. While the great feast of the liberation of the Jewish people is being celebrated outside, here in this room it is the hour of solitude, misunderstanding and failure. But Jesus is not absorbed by anguish, and by the death that is drawing near. This little table is an announcement of the great banquet that will take place in the kingdom of God at the end of time (Luke 22,16). With this gesture, Jesus shows that he is not held prisoner by this incomprehensible situation. He leaves a hope sown in the heart of history, a hope that will accompany his followers down through the ages.

- We are invited to break bread in memory of Jesus. Thus the Eucharist is born, prototype of all community prayer within the Church. In our Eucharistic celebrations, the life of oppression is made manifest through the exploited bodies, the poor clothes and the uncertain future. The words bears the accent of the narrow streets and markets, not that of books nor schools. The prayers speak of the dangers of expulsion, of children who have disappeared, of being scorned in hospitals and public offices. What then do we celebrate? How is it possible to sing and dance in such conditions? Why let joy fill these bodies condemned to slavery, this flesh of the exiles, this merchandise for traders? Is not the celebration an escape from reality into a religious dream?

- It is true that in the Church the celebration can deteriorate in some way. At times, it is reduced to a precept that is punctually acquitted like the payment of a tax. Then the celebration becomes a cold and legal rite as if we are completing some business.

On other occasions it has the gleam of lights and flowers, the embraces and the enthusiasm encouraged by applause and watchwords. But if it draws away from daily realities, the enthusiasm will evaporate quickly when faced with life's difficulties and exigencies.

The celebration can also be dominated by the urgency to denounce and to work. Then a tone of efficacy will prevail. There will be room only for militancy and efforts, but not for mercy and gratitude.



- The true celebration allows the fullness of the Kingdom to enter into the present difficulties, and the communion of the Spirit into the fragile relationships between sinners. In the fleeting present moment, it welcomes all of salvation history in the symbolism elaborated by past generations through the course of the centuries. It makes room for symbols born from community commitment. It listens with an open heart to the word spoken by God in the past, and allows the words of our brothers and sisters of today to enter by the same door. It knows how to welcome the presence of Jesus in the bread and wine but it does not forget the poor salaries of the peasants who produce the wheat for this bread, nor the market speculations through which it passed to arrive at the altar. If there is feasting and singing, it is not to escape reality, but to be nourished by hope and to return to the struggle for liberation alongside the Lord of history. The celebration takes place in one living community, but it remains open to all other ecclesial communities.

- The Eucharistic celebration is the prayer par excellence of the Christian Community. That's why we give particular attention to it so that it may give clarity to all other forms of common prayer.

The growth of the community celebration

- ***The community of life reunites.***

The book of Acts (1,14) tells us that after the Ascension the disciples, along with some women and Mary the mother of Jesus, "*all joined together constantly in prayer.*" The Christian community begins to grow. The group of believers who already "*had everything in common*" (Acts 2,44), and share their goods according to the needs of each one, also "*broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts*" (2,46-47).

The community that comes together to celebrate is not only a liturgical community but one that has been previously united in everyday life. In the poverty of the villages there is a network of solidarity with an exchange both of little economic aids as well as of friendship and hardship. In community meetings this solidarity is organized and becomes stronger and more conscious.

People are not anonymous to one another, they are not faces without names or persons without roots. That's why when they meet at the place of celebration, they become streams of life that embrace and rejoice together. The community celebrates with all the intensity of life, obeying the command of Jesus: "*Do this in memory of me*" (Luke 22,19).

The community of Jesus' disciples gathered around the table. All brought the story of their relationship with others, of their services to the Kingdom, but also of their rivalries for first place, their lack of understanding of Jesus' dark journey of confrontation in Jerusalem, and all their weaknesses.

Today's community is also a community of imperfect persons with their conflicts, fears and misunderstandings. It is a community of sinners. But the community as such also commits sins in which all of us participate. At the beginning of the Eucharist we recognize our need for the forgiveness of God, forgiveness that we allow to enter among us and to flow through us like pure water bringing forgiveness one to the other.

A community that comes together is, in itself, a sacrament of the Kingdom's unifying strength which overcomes all the mechanisms which cause the disintegration of society, as well as all the obscure tendencies hidden within us, causing us to isolate ourselves in order to defend our personal comfort.

● ***Sharing the living word.***

After sharing a festive greeting and forgiveness, we now gather around the table to share the word of God and our own words. What we read and what we hear are nothing but more or less abstract reflections. The word of God was life before it was a written word. By giving a piece of free land to a nation of slaves, God writes a paragraph of human history for all generations to come, because this is God's way of acting and our way of knowing God.

We are used to hearing a torrent of words. Some are no more than empty vibrations in the air. Others are encased in seductive wrappings, created with fantasy, or distorted by their own fragility. But the word of God is life and action: once leaving the mouth of God it does not return without accomplishing its mission. Seeing the torrent of life that is released by the word of Jesus, Peter says to him: "*You have the words of eternal life*" (John 6,68). Moreover, whether working or walking along the streets, Jesus himself is the Word of God.

The word of God heard today in community also creates a torrent of life and seeks to be incarnated in each of us. The Word is the same for all, but as it reaches each of us it has an accent and a music that we can only hear in our specific situation. After the celebration, the word will spread through the streets in the body and spirit of each Christian.

In community dialogue and in prayer, we express what we feel. To build community, we must pay attention to this new incarnation of the word in our brothers and sisters. It can be a light, an accusation, a cry of pain.... The community is the welcoming ground where the word of each can be sown; the word, distinct in each existence, has one unique origin and this origin unites us.



Thus, while sharing the unique Word as it comes forth from each individual life, the word of the whole community is born. In group meetings, in occasional encounters, and principally in the Eucharist, we have the elaboration of each one's contribution, the word of the community. It is a word that expresses what God is bringing to birth today in our midst. It surges forth marked by the

language of the marginalized, with its incorrect grammar, just as the preaching of Jesus was marked by the accent of Galilee, which made him a man coming from a culture of poverty.

Common silence is part of sharing. It develops the sense of listening and assimilation, and it expresses the sense of mystery that is included in every meeting with God and with others.

In many other community meetings the word is shared: team meetings, family assemblies, informal get-togethers, popular religious celebrations... God has given us his word!

● *At the center: a gift even to the cross*

Bread and wine shared were the common meal in the time of Jesus. Bread is the nourishment that gives strength; wine is the symbol of joy.

When a peasant offers a piece of bread or a glass of wine, what is behind his gesture? The peasant prepares the land, sows the seed, and watches it grow for months, looking at the skies in the hope that the rain will come at the opportune moment. He harvests it, kneads it, cooks it, giving it the savor of the family. When he breaks it and shares it, he is really offering his work, his art, his patient and contemplative hope in the mysterious growth of the plant. It is not only a metaphor to say that he offers part of his life in the piece of bread. By the sacrifice of his life's work he gives life to all those who sit at his table.

Jesus chose the symbolism of bread and wine to express the gift of his life even to death, so that we may live: "*This is my body given for you...*" (Luke 22,19). Jesus went freely to his death. "*No one takes it [my life] from me; I lay it down of my own accord*" (John 10,18). Insofar as Jesus is faithful in his commitment to the Kingdom, He goes towards a confrontation with the Jewish institutions which lead him to the cross. Jesus died once and for all. The cross cannot be repeated. But the risen Jesus present in the bread and the wine offers his life to us each day and to all those who throughout the centuries draw near to receive him.

The oppressed people, a new suffering servant, "*a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering,*" (Is. 53,3) understand the life that comes from the cross of Jesus. They, too, are divested of their lives which they leave sealed in the merchandise in the factories, sown in the land of others, and buried in the cemeteries of great luxurious buildings. Others assault and despoil them when they try to be faithful to the life that God has given them and their families by demanding work and justice.

Besides the Eucharist, there exist other forms of celebrating this mystery of the cross which is at the center of popular piety. The bleeding christs of popular religiosity preside over the prayer of many families in the hidden suffering of the poor masses. The way of the cross that winds through the narrow streets identifies the passion of Christ and that of the



people. In pilgrimages and penitential processions led by the cross, the people embrace the passion of Jesus and receive his pardon and strength.

All who welcome the cross of Jesus, unite themselves to his cause. They will seek to defend life wherever it is endangered, and struggle to build the Kingdom even where this surrender leads them to the cross. For those of us who share with them the mystery of the cross, the people's capacity to sacrifice — to give and to share the little they have, to begin again when they are demolished by the covetousness of others or by the elements of nature — is an inexhaustible fountain of fidelity to the plan of God. While they are despoiled, life is given to us (2 Cor 4,12).

● *Communion with God and with God's people*

By eating the bread and drinking the wine, those who share the peasant's table assimilate his gift. By receiving the Eucharist, I accept the gift of the life and death of Jesus. His life passes into mine.

When we gather, a portion of human life is brought to the community by each of us. In the celebration, all find themselves and all are intertwined. Thus they share forgiveness, the word and commitment. Now, in communion they are all united in the same shared bread. They who eat one bread truly form one body. We are not only in communion with Jesus. In a profound sense, we are united to one another.

All true celebration permits us to experience in some way this profound reality of our faith. For a brief moment, all the barriers that separate us dissolve. We sense that the dissensions confronting us are not the ultimate truth of life. We walk on our way more or less alone, but the joy of the celebration, which we allow to penetrate us without resistance, speaks of the ultimate truth of communion for which we were made.

We want to affirm the faith that we have in the ultimate reconciliation of all creation. Now, in the obscurity of history, even though we carry in our flesh the wounds of the passion, we allow the joy of this faith to permeate us. The festive spirit is therefore expressed by songs and gestures.

We cannot in truth be "for others" if we are not "with others." The experience of festive communion does not draw us away from our commitment to create community but rather knocks down the barriers that confront us, and awakens in us a dynamism that creates new roads. We cannot knock down walls by banging our heads against them but we can open them by our coming together and by singing.

Surrendered to this flow of communion, we will allow ourselves to be saved from narrow individualism in our communications with God. We relate to God by means of people. People, with their reserves of creativity and of participation which their religious faith sustains, can melt the rigidity of many of our celebrations.



The joy of their celebrations is not naive, but paschal. Its roots are sunken deep into the earth of sacrifice. It is a joy that is united to persecution (Matt. 6,20). In prison *"in chains"* (Eph. 6,20), Paul exhorts the Christians to *"sing and make music in your hearts to the Lord"* (5,19). While still a prisoner waiting for his sentence which can be death, he writes to the Philippians *"I am glad and rejoice with all of you. So you too should be glad and rejoice with me"* (2,17-18). Throughout the letter he repeats numerous times that to act as a Christian is to act with joy (Phil. 4,4; 2,29). This joy is a gift of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5,22). When we accept it by entering the prisons of the oppressed, we do not evade history, but rather we escape from self in a communion which leads towards freedom.

Community celebration in persecution

The seven churches of Asia minor suffered one of the cruelest persecutions of the Roman Empire. When the communities united for "the breaking of the bread" how did the reading of the Apocalypse resound?

Each Christian brought to the clandestine meeting the latest news: the names of the prisoners and martyrs. In this situation of annihilation, they wept like John before the impossibility of understanding the course of history. *"I wept and wept because no one was found worthy of opening the scroll or looking inside"* (Apoc. 5,4). In this book, sealed by seven seals which nothing could open, the history of humanity is written and the risen Christ, *"the lamb"* slain but living (5,6), opens it before John and the whole assembly. This is the sense they gave to the persecution: the end of the Roman empire and the triumph of the Christians faithful even to martyrdom.

Our communities also bring to the celebrations their suffering and the shadows of the oppressed, who do not always see the sense of history.

The wounds and the sufferings are present in the vision of John. The persecuted *"called out in a loud voice 'How long Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?'"* (Apoc. 6,10). Reality cannot be hidden. The persecution will continue until the number of those to be killed is completed (Apoc. 6,11). But it gives sense to death, by locating it within the plan of God.

In highly colorful and beautiful images, the vision of the new Jerusalem is drawn before the eyes of the Christians. She is beautiful like an adored bride (21,2) and we see that God moves among his people, drying the tears of the Christians (21,3). In the new world there will be no darkness, no closed doors, the nations will be bathed in light (21,24-25). There we will hear hymns to the risen Christ and the songs of the martyrs. The future fullness enters the community of the martyrs through the inspired words of John, filled with symbols taken from

Scripture and from life, which have great significance for Christians but are incomprehensible to the persecutors and their spies.

In the difficulties of the moments, they have seen the light shining at the end of the tunnel announcing their liberation. It begins to illuminate the road and the faces, and to direct their way. For those who have not seen this light, the songs are foolish and the joy an absurd naivete.

Today, too, our oppressed people celebrate joyfully as they contemplate the risen Christ and the Kingdom of God. This is where they draw their strength to commit themselves even to the cross, without letting the seal of the beast be applied to their foreheads so that they can buy or sell in his kingdom (Apoc. 13,16-17).

In this vision of the end times, God's past action among the chosen people comes to clarify the present moment. Christian communities are the new chosen people who journey across the desert of persecution towards a new land. God protects them (7,16-17). Like the first-exodus Jews, everyone has a special name before God. No one is unknown to God as his seal is on their foreheads (7,3). God will loosen the plagues of Egypt against the Roman Empire (8,12; 16,1-12). Rome is the new Babylon (18,2) which will die like the first and the Christians will be free. The God of the first creation (4,11) is also the creator of the new earth and heavens.

The communities, which are going to participate in the breaking of the bread and the sharing of this word of God, enter into the paschal mystery of Jesus under the weight of persecution. They, too, are bread that is broken. In accepting the light of the Resurrection, they take strength from communion, like a united and joyful people, faithful to the Kingdom of God in the midst of the Roman empire.

V

The dynamism of prayer life

Prayer is an encounter with God in history. God goes "before" us proposing a journey of freedom. God has a plan of salvation, but He is not an aseptic programmer who remains distanced from us. God is in our midst, as Jesus was when he went to Jerusalem leading his group of disciples.

As a parable for our prayer life, we are going to look at the meeting of Jesus with the blind man precisely on that road leading to Jerusalem. *"Jesus was walking on ahead of them; they were in a daze and those who followed were apprehensive"* (Mark 10,32). The disciples continued to be "blind" when faced with the hazardous direction that the life of Jesus had taken. They followed him in fear, without understanding him.

The needy called to plenitude

While people are coming and going along the road, Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, sits at the roadside. He depends totally on the generosity of those who pass by. His blindness is recognized and is an appeal for help from others. Even in his isolation he has heard the rumor that *"a certain Jesus"* cured the sick.

Bartimaeus has a level of need, deeper than his blindness, but he has not yet fully recognized it. Later, when he meets Jesus not only as a blind man but with his whole being, he will become aware of this.

We all have needs that lead us to seek God precisely when we have run out of possibilities. When the ship begins to sink, or when

medicine, science and friends can do no more for us... we turn to God. Somehow, we discover God at the point where all else fails, where our limitations become obvious, where our unsatisfied needs are revealed.

Still, it is not simply a matter of having more or less distressing needs. In the depths of our hearts we are radically poor. God made us with an absolute yearning. It is not a torment but a call, a heritage that no one can take away from us. We are desired "children," both when we go to faraway lands with full knapsacks on our back, and when we destroy ourselves caring for the pigs of others.

This poverty cannot be satiated by triumphs or friendship, nor can it be buried under our failures and deceptions. No horizon limits it, and no abyss can swallow it. False responses can fool it, but only for a time.

It is not a yearning for the past that moves us to look back, paralyzed by our weeping over a lost paradise. Nor it is an insatiable mouth devouring any appetizing fruit that comes near it.

The satisfied and the well-established try to build walls around their possessions so that they can securely enjoy what they own. In the meantime, the others - the displaced - continue on their journey. Sooner or later, when the call of the infinite horizon surges from the depths of a poverty that cannot be assuaged, these defenses will become prisons.

When we live in solidarity with the poor, we are engulfed by deep currents of loneliness and helplessness. Then, to our surprise, we discover that the deepest misery cannot extinguish the search for plenitude, freedom and justice. We are invited to journey forward with these displaced persons. God goes before us.

This radical poverty is a call to a full relationship with God deep within our being. In history, this call could not be either extinguished or fulfilled. However, those who begin to live it are transformed into travelers and creators, as they follow God who "goes before us" opening the ways of freedom and justice.



In contemplation, we live this call as an untiring attention and confident hope in the response of God; in discernment, we live it as a seeking and an opening to the initiatives of God's will. In contemplation in action, this call becomes creative adhesion to God's plans, while in community prayer it becomes an invitation to leave our solitude and go towards a new people.

Like the blind Bartimaeus, we feel that we are seated at the roadside crying out our needs to the God who passes. Our physical blindness stops us from going forward. The Lord listens, though we do not know what the response will be. This blindness is not our deepest poverty. The encounter with Jesus - this inexhaustible Other - is the only answer to the more radical poverty coming from our hearts. To pray is to live this meeting in a free and lucid way; this is only possible if we are moving forward.

A newness that dialogues with us

The blind Bartimaeus is seated at the roadside. He cannot control the itineraries of the people who pass by, nor their generosity. His substance and his life depend on these people.

One day there are the sounds of a large group of people drawing near. Hearing that it is Jesus who is passing, he cries out, expressing the limitation that now keeps him tied to the roadside. "*Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!*" (Mark 10,47). Jesus stops and says: "*Call him*" (10,49). The blind man throws his mantle to one side, jumps to his feet and comes to Jesus. "*What do you want me to do for you?*" Jesus asked him? The blind man said: "*Rabbi, I want to see*". (10,50-51).

In the life of prayer we often start with our needs. This is important because what we feel, what we are worried about keeps us tied. In the life of prayer we often start with our needs.

God does not answer us mechanically. God is unpredictably free and takes unsuspected initiatives that do not respond so much to our expectations as to our needs, to what is necessary for us in the plan of salvation. We cannot manipulate God to our ruin.

God establishes a difference between us. God is distinct, the Other. We cannot demand anything of God, nor can we be absorbed or diminished by his immensity. God distances himself from us and frustrates us when we confuse him with an ocean in which we foolishly want to lose ourselves. That is why God establishes a dialogue with us where our differences are acknowledged. Each time we enter into a relationship of freedom with God, we are made more ourselves: our yes or no to God's proposals will mature little by little. At times, our "*what we need*" (Matt. 6,8) coincides with what we want. But not always, and then what God proposes disconcerts us. At times, God heals us as the blind man was healed, but in other moments he says to us what Jesus said to the sons of Zebedee: "*You don't know what you are asking*" (Mark 10,38). Then, like a light that is too strong, God's grace becomes blinding for those walking in darkness.

When we are living among the poor, the newness that God offers, as an answer to our petitions, often comes through the oppressed, these displaced persons.

In contemplation, where I express what I am living; I am equally silent and hope for God's initiative. In discernment, I must discover God's new offer and dialogue with him. In contemplation in action, I give a concrete name to God's creative action. In community celebration, I allow myself to be surprised by the word of others.

Like the blind man on the roadside, we cry out. We receive all the originality and surprise of God's innovations. We dialogue with God. Thus, we are made more mature as we go towards an ever-deeper relationship with the Lord, precisely with our differences, and try to find our way towards freedom. God does not absorb us but rather becomes like the word of someone close to us.

A passover that transforms us.

The blind man cries out, but those who are with Jesus "*rebuked him and told him to be quiet*" (10,48). This brief reference leads us to an important dimension of the scene. Bartimaeus' very blindness hinders him from getting up and making his way through the crowd to go to Jesus.

Moreover, instead of helping him, those who are with Jesus make his life more difficult. This blind man, crying out on the roadside, is inconvenient and slows the progress of Jesus and his group.

Jesus doesn't seem to notice what is happening. Doesn't Jesus hear? Doesn't He want to stop? For the blind man, this is the occasion of a lifetime. Thus, in the face of all these difficulties he "*shouted all the more: Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me*" (10,48).

The newness that God proposes as a personal and social liberation in our meeting with him does not penetrate us without a painful passover. On some occasions, what God asks of us is objectively painful and all our sensibilities are shaken, as with Jesus in Gethsemane.

At other times, since we are so used to walking in darkness and in a narrow world, God's plans seems so luminous and surprising that we feel as if we are blind. God's way of acting does not coincide with our ideas. This is why when God forgives Nineveh because the people repent of their sins, Jonah, not understanding how far God's goodness can go, is disappointed and throws himself on the ground, asking God to let him die because "*it would be better for me to die than to live*" (4,3).

At times, it happens that our fear builds false fantasies when we have to face the unknown. When Jonah was sent as a prophet to Nineveh, he went out and "*ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish*" (1,3).

The fact is that when he begins to preach, the inhabitants of Nineveh listen to him. All the people, beginning with the King, will do penance. Jonah's fantasy was false, and the ship, that his fear had told him was an anchor of salvation, brought him to the bottom of the ocean and into the belly of a whale.

God's way of acting in history seems slow; it grows in secret where we do not see it and respects the rhythm of the human process. The Jews in Babylon experience only the pain of the exile while God had already taken Cyrus "*by the hand*" and had called him by his name (Is. 45,1-3). The longer the time of exile, the closer the liberation of the Jews, but they were incapable of seeing this.

Those who accompany Jesus today, and who believe they understand him because of their function or their title, at times act as if they are specialists for a God whom they do not understand, telling those crying on the roadside to be quiet.

Somehow, this whole process purifies us and changes us until the new wine of the Kingdom can be poured out into new wineskins that can receive it without adulterating it. God leads us towards a new vision, towards a new life. But letting go of the old life to receive the new person causes us to suffer. It is the inevitable passover for receiving "*the love of Christ which is beyond knowledge, [that] you may be filled with the utter fullness of God*" (Eph. 3,19).

When lived in solidarity with the poor, this passover has its own tonality. Our personal ambiguities become clearer in the light of the poor. Some of those who walk with Jesus are disconcerted when they hear words of accusation or proclamations about the rights of the poor. They want to silence these voices and the voices of all who agree with them. The oppressed are as afraid to die in the desert as were the Jews; they ask us for what we do not have. History, with its shadows and its retrogressions, leads us to lose sight of God who seems lost and far away on a mountaintop, while alongside us people are making emergency idols covered with brilliant gold.

During personal contemplation, we experience various resistances that stop us from advancing towards the mystery of God. In discernment we must choose one possibility, leaving aside others that are also agreeable and enlightening. In contemplation in action, many situations and persons present themselves as clay refusing to become transparent. In community prayer, limitations, confrontations and difficult commitments can make the arms too heavy for embraces and the voice too serious for singing.

The blind man continues to tell Jesus of his new situation. He is more anguished than when he was sitting tranquilly by the roadside, accepting his blindness: *"Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"* At this moment in our prayer life, all has been placed in the hands of God. Through the passover, we have understood that fullness is a gift.

The gift of fullness

"Jesus stopped and said: 'Call him'" (Mark 10,49). The blind man goes as far as he can. Now all depends on Jesus. Jesus calls him to a meeting but not simply to be healed. He does not just listen to the petition and heal the man of his blindness. Not only does Jesus notice what is lacking to the blind man, he also sees the best that is in the man: his faith. He helps him to discover it and to value it, as if He himself had done nothing. *"Go, your faith has healed you"* (10,52).

The blind man receives his sight, Jesus has responded to his primary need. His cry has been heard and answered.

However, in the meeting, Bartimaeus has discovered a deeper poverty and fullness that can only be satisfied by following Jesus who goes up to Jerusalem. Jesus asks nothing but Bartimaeus, full of wonder, "*followed Jesus along the road*" (10,52).

By means of the passover, we discover that we are not possessors of the fullness: "*Have you ever given orders to the morning or shown the dawn its place?*" God asks Job (28,12).

Fullness emerges in us like a gift, and has many different names: peace, joy, sensitivity, reconciliation, communion....

The experience of fullness which arises in us at certain moments is not "necessarily" associated with our plans. God is greater than both our limitations, and our plans. That's why the fullness that we find in history is surprising, is celebrated and is gratefully welcomed.

However, fullness is given just for a moment, then it is gone. Only at noontime when the sun shines directly above our heads are we able to see ourselves for a moment without shadows. After that, we go forward with our shadows stuck to our heels. But this moment of light and coherency, where all is one, guides us, strengthens us and confirms us in our journey. Contrary to the desires of the disciples, who want to hold on to this moment of happiness, the mount of the transfiguration is left behind. There remains only the road leading to Jerusalem.

This experience can be neither captured nor retained. We must let it go with the same freedom with which we received it. God goes before us. He is "always greater." Our concepts and plans finish, fade away and allow us to move towards new horizons.

The gratuity of the experience of fullness leads us to dedicate our lives to the Kingdom. It is not a matter of making an investment like one who awaits a profit nor of making bets like one who expects to win a prize. Life offers itself in the mystery of the Kingdom. When Jesus tells us to give freely what we have freely received (Matt. 10,8), He doesn't refer simply to some aspects of our time or of our knowledge...

but to our whole being. Fullness given: fullness freely received and freely given. Is this not the greatest expression of freedom found in our meeting with God?

Among the poor, we meet those who surprise us by their joy and goodness, even though they are aware of the bleakness of their lives. Although they have nothing, they say *"the person always remains"* to be given. This is what is most important and no one can take it away from them.

In contemplative prayer, we experience fullness as union with God. In discernment, it is experienced as a confirming peace. In contemplation in action fullness is experienced as a transfiguration which unites. In community prayer, it is experienced as a festive celebration of the plenitude of the Kingdom.

An encounter that frees us to follow Jesus

Prayer is a meeting of the whole person with God, which is concentrated in certain moments called "times of prayer," even though these moments embrace our whole life.

"So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8,36). In the meeting with Jesus, we seek liberation from external structures that oppress us and from obscure interior forces by which, in reality, we oppress ourselves.

"...you were called to be free" (Gal. 5,13). In the meeting with God, we are freed so that we can love. *"...serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'"* (Gal. 5,13-14). The blind man was freed from his blindness but he was also freed for the vision he had regained.

In prayer we draw near to God with our blindness, and our limitations. Some limitations are old, like rebellious wounds that will not heal. Others are new, provoked by recent shocks. We can be freed from our limitations in two distinct ways. At times, we are healed like the blind man. At other times, our limitations remain but we understand them in a



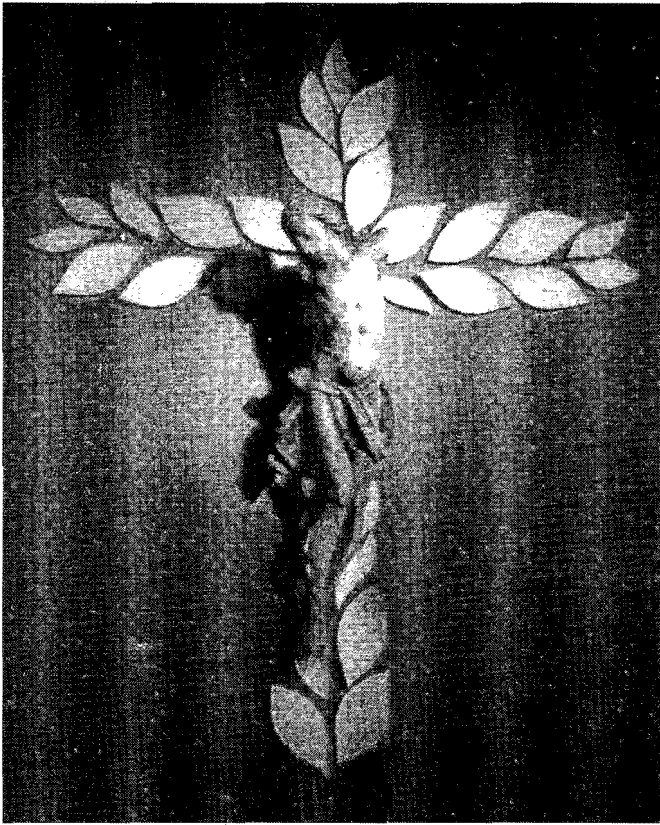
new way. When Paul asks God to take away his thorn in the flesh God's answer is: "*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness*" (2 Cor. 12,8). Instead of being a cause of paralyzing anguish, his limitation is transformed into a source of liberty.

- Once Bartimaeus was healed, he did not go his own way fascinated by his ability to see. When we meet Jesus, we, too, are healed of our greed, thus awakening our capacities. The blind man follows Jesus towards Jerusalem, where in the service of the Kingdom, Jesus will love even to the end. "*No one has greater love than this, to lay down his life for his friends*" (John 15,13). It will be a controversial love, causing organized and efficient opposition which leads Jesus to the cross. This creative, committed love which Paul calls service is at the heart of following Christ.

The cross of Jerusalem is the maximum expression of the unconditional love of God for us while we were still sinners (Rom. 5,8). In all truth, we can stand before this crucified God without any defense mechanisms. The sight of God who *loves us as we are*, tenderly alights on our reality, as Mary expresses so well in her hymn (Luke 1,48).

The first consequence of this experience is to love ourselves as God loves us: as we really are, without being more exigent with ourselves than God is. When all is said and done, the acceptance of ourselves does not depend on the image that we see in our mirror but rather on this creative love of God which reaches us in a new way through every situation. This love is not simply a spoken word but rather a faithful presence that accompanies us because God walks with us.

Once we love ourselves as we are, we can love others as ourselves (Gal. 5,14). We will love each individual as he/she is: oppressor or oppressed, friend or stranger, near or far, respecting the whole truth of the person, without painting it with a pious varnish that disfigures it. This is the only way that we can take people seriously and draw near to them in a creative fashion. Thus, we love the oppressor with a word that can be heard as the surgeon's scalpel (Heb. 4,12) and we love the oppressed through a close solidarity that walks with them along the difficult path of liberation. To disfigure the oppressive reality of others is to run away from a difficult love that can lead us to the cross.



Evangelical love must be lived out through service. The servant is not always a perfect image. *"Many were appalled at him — his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man"* (Is. 52,14). Service can severely mark someone for life. When we meet the poor, the oppressed, the suffering servant, we feel that through their disfigured bodies, we have been reached by the inexhaustible salvation offered to all. They teach us the way of service beyond all narcissistic perfection: the following of Jesus crucified.

Prayer is a meeting with God in the heart of history. God who loves us as we are, and thus liberates us so we may follow Jesus in a loving service to others whom we must welcome as they are.

VI

A living synthesis

At the end of this journey, we can summarize the four dimensions of prayer life and see how one is born from the other.

When I am really contemplating, something new is born in this relationship, in the meeting between my liberty and that of God. Although at certain moments I have the impression (on the surface of consciousness) that nothing is happening, nevertheless, at a deeper level this is not true.

In considering contemplation as a central activity of life, I am obliged to ask myself what is happening in my relationship with God? what impulses are moving within me? in what direction is God leading me and what resistance is there within me?

All these questions are already the beginning of discernment. It is necessary to know what is happening in my life of prayer, to formulate it and speak about it in spiritual accompaniment.

All these experiences are oriented towards exterior action in the service of God's Kingdom. Thus, we pass from discernment to action in history, where there is an authentic battle between the Kingdom of God and the idols of this world. If the commitment comes from God, it really creates life and liberty. That's why it will meet with opposition. If it cannot be manipulated through rewards and recognition, it will suffer repression. It is a creative passion. In either case it is possible to contemplate in action the work of God. No reality is alien to God and even the thickest clay can become transparent.

This process cannot be lived in isolation from others. The Kingdom brings people together, it creates community. Reaching for life as a community, we gather to celebrate through the uniqueness of each individual. From there, we go out to the world with a stronger and more committed hope.

- Throughout this journey, we have gone through the process both of commitment and of meeting God as two inseparable sides of the same life. On the other hand, we have divided this process into four dimensions. Each concerns part of a person's life and being, but all of them intertwine to form a living fabric.

If one fails the others are affected. How can I be a contemplative in action without first discerning the newness that God has given and the just collaboration that God asks of me? How can I not lose my way in personal contemplation if I do not make a commitment nor experience the harshness of history and the power of God's liberation?

- Nevertheless, although none of these dimensions can be excluded, they cannot all be lived in the same way in each person, nor can they be lived with the same intensity at every stage of life.

There are contemplative vocations lived in solitude and others lived in a secularized milieu which seems to have obliterated even the minimal traces of faith.

Nor does a person live the same way at each stage of life. In moments of big decisions, life seems to be transformed into one big process of discernment. A situation of emergency can demand overflowing activity without allowing us the time needed for personal contemplation. A moment of illness can isolate us from work and from persons, placing us in great solitude before God.

- The summary that we have considered is merely a map with some signposts. One's prayer life cannot be enclosed in a blueprint. But at times, a blueprint can help us to seek a dynamic balance which integrates the different dimensions of our being and our work into a permanent reference to God.

● The equilibrium of the wayfarer, who is discovering new realities, is not the passive agreement of an apathetic person. Trying to bring together aspects that can only be defined while on the move, the wayfarer creates continuously new syntheses. If one aspect moves ahead of the other, he doesn't become discouraged but, in hope, takes steps to bring about a new balance.

**Let us consider certain traits of wayfarers
who are dealing with this integration.**

Wayfarers accept themselves as individuals, responsible for their own uniqueness, and for fulfilling their own potentialities by establishing a personal dialogue with God. At the same time, they live their own uniqueness as part of a body, within the community where they were born and among the people to whom they belong.

Creation is concentrated within their being. It is contemplated and used as a fountain of life and rest which re-creates. This contemplation is carried out within history, where they discover the forces that struggle to take possession of the earth, and where they are united to the work of God which liberates creation from these oppressing forces.

They are contemplative, convinced that the encounter with God is at the center of every human life: that this is the most determining relationship one can have. God is not lost in a vacuum, but rather goes ahead of us, while in the midst of us. He comes from the depths of every blocked situation walking towards the future. We can only remain with God insofar as we walk with God towards a new synthesis of our being and our story.

Since God has placed the world in their hands, wayfarers assume their responsibility in history. At the same time, they keep their lives constantly open to the inspiration of God, who alone has the power to understand history in all its density and to bring harmony to all the forces which struggle within them.

Wayfarers seek justice, which springs from God, as an exigence of judgement and of God's divine action in a sinful world. At the same

time, they know how to see this justice with the merciful heart of God, which does not seek the death of sinners, but rather that they be converted and live.

They discern, evaluate, and plan so that through a firm and serious commitment, their love can be really efficacious in history. At the same time, they know how to offer their lives without wanting to repress others, to take credit for projects, or to throw their weight around. Thus, they offer their days freely, as much in the contemplative silence of prayer as in the service of God and humanity.

In communion with God, origin of life, they struggle as Jesus did against the suffering of the world. With Jesus they assume the inevitable pain not only of their basic human fragility but of all the passions within themselves which contradict the system imposed on the poor of this world.

They seek to give themselves totally to God and the Kingdom, striving to reach the fullness of life. They know how to see their own limitations, recognizing them, accepting them and integrating them, knowing that they are not necessarily an obstacle to passing God's grace to the world.

They see utopia on the horizon with all its power to fascinate, to mobilize and to orient their steps. But they respect the rhythm of each person as well as their own, and the slowness of history. Thus the moment is not only a challenge, an effort to carry out and to overcome, but it is also a place of rest, of satisfaction and of joy. They know how to look with tenderness and humor on the limitations of an evolving world.

They live their relationship with God in the intimacy of an irreplaceable personal history, in the secret of their hearts. They are grateful for the Church's sacramentality, and celebrate with all peoples the fullness of the Kingdom in the darkness of history.

VII

A privileged sacrament of the meeting with God

At the end of this journey, we return to our point of departure. The poor are a privileged sacrament of the meeting with God. We have gratefully discovered them in this journey towards the "new earth." They receive us into their inner lives, into their social class, into their communities, into their plans of liberation, and into their experience of God. With the poor, we cross the deserts of history and of our relationship with God as we move towards an inexhaustible fullness.

This sacrament is first a cry, a tortured call from the depths of oppression where there is so much pain. It is a protest drawn from the indestructible dignity of the poor. Still, it is not only their cry, but also that of the Spirit who groans within us and who, in the disorder of our suffering, makes our cry his own (Rom. 8,26).

In addition, this sacrament is a judgement. We must discern in it the body of the Lord, as in the Eucharist, in order not to eat and drink our own judgement of condemnation (1 Cor. 11,28-32) but to recognize God's call along the way. The misery of Lazarus judged the life of the rich man (Luke 16, 19-31). The misery of the poor judges the opulence and wealth of the prominent people of Sodom and Gomorrah (16,49-50). We will all have a conclusive confrontation with the poor at the last judgement (Matt. 25,45). Even now the existence of the poor passes a definitive judgement on the value of each human life.



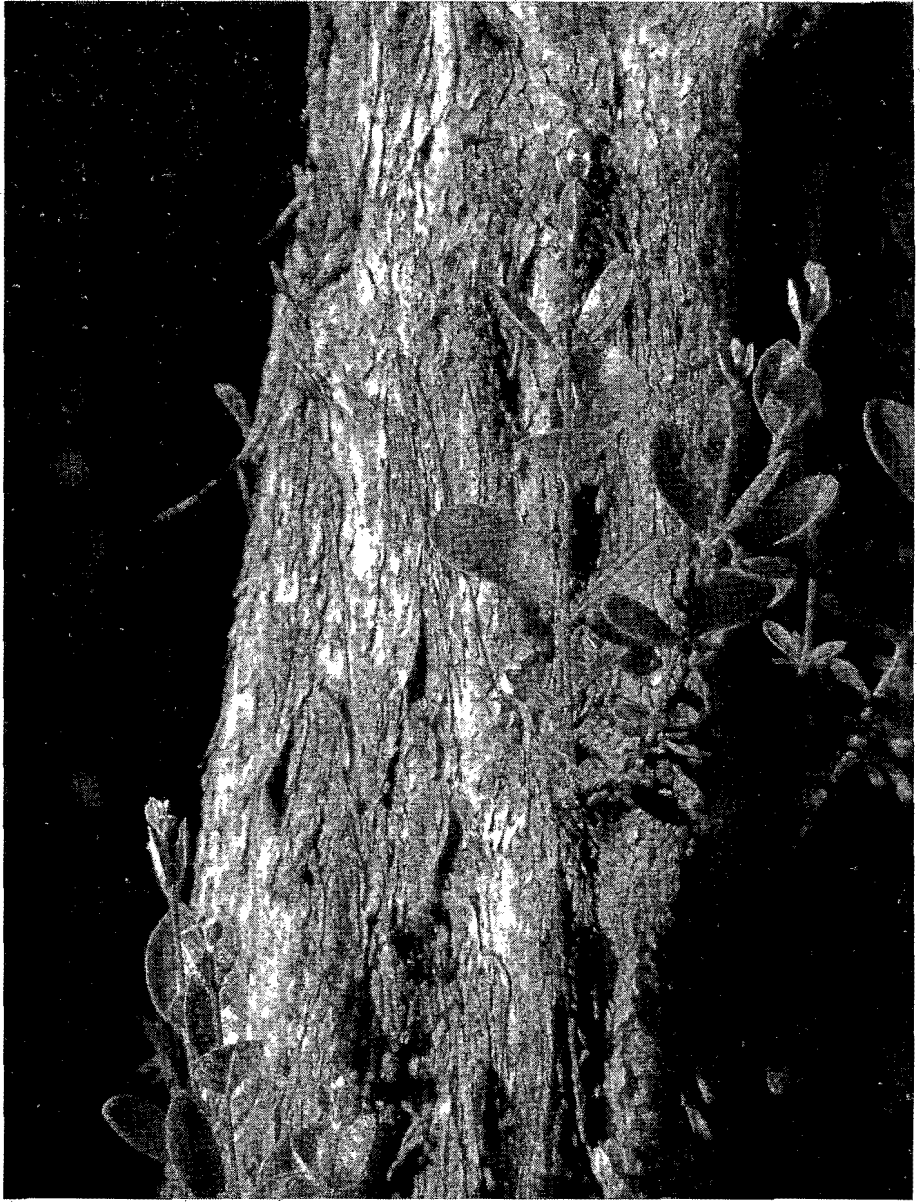
We also find reserves of evangelical life in this sacrament of the poor. Small in power, large in number, the poor represent a "remnant" of goodness in the midst of oppression, of cordiality in a world of formal relationships, of community in a world of individualism protected by locks and reinforced doors. If we draw near to this sacrament, we will be saved from an empty life which freezes us to the bone.

This "remnant" of God's people is not a pool of stagnant water in some desert. Nor is it the result of a cloudburst which passes. It remains; it is the "stump" of a tree, cut down to its roots by oppression. It looks dead but it has deep, firm roots and it will blossom forth with new life. It is the fertile land where the seed of the future Kingdom of God is sown. With God, this "remnant" is creator of the future new land. That's why it is the sacrament of the Kingdom.

As with all sacraments, it is a sensible sign. In the poor, we can see, hear, touch, embrace... the life of God in our midst. As our whole body is open to this new reality of life and death, a new sensitivity is created within us.

Our body, and through it our whole being, frees itself from the impact of a world that pursues us with its publicity drawing us into the emptiness of its products and of its changing fashions. Our body and our affectivity learn to perceive in another way. What we "perceived" in the past as gain, now is instinctively "hated" (Sp.Ex. 63) as dung.

Thus we experience the meeting with the sacrament of the poor as a true sign of a meeting with God who frees us to love. This experience of freedom can only be grasped by contemplating the poor and crucified body of Jesus, which transforms us. Such is the grace of the sacrament.



VIII

The scandal of mortal flesh

In the first letter of John we find elements that help us to examine the truth of our meeting with God in the life of prayer. To meet this God, whom *"no one has ever seen"* (1John 4,12) it is necessary to overcome the scandal of Jesus presenting himself *"in the flesh"* (1John 4,2).

In the community to whom John was writing, a heresy was developing that could not admit this scandal. For this community, Christ - a spiritual being - descended on Jesus - a normal man - at his baptism and left him before his passion. Thus the Christ never suffered and never poured out his blood.

This group felt that they had a superior knowledge of God who certainly didn't go through the mortal flesh of the Son of God made man. Thanks to their "spirituality" they considered themselves sinless (1 John 1,8) and had sufficient influence and social power to scorn and mistreat others in the community. As a result they separated from the community and followed their own path.

● But John was witness of what he had seen, of what he had touched with his hands, of what he had heard (cf. John 1,1-3), of what he had contemplated of the revelation of God in the human existence of Jesus of Nazareth. God does not ask us to *"seek him in vain"* (Is. 45,19) but in our midst. There alone can God be found.

The truth of our prayer resides in our capacity to enter into communication with God with our whole being. That is the only way to know God and to be in God. At the same time, all the words that we speak in prayer must become flesh, an embrace and a commitment.

Otherwise, they will be no more than a sound that fades into the air, a sentiment that evaporates in the heat of a distracted heart.

When mortal flesh is despoiled and poor, it seems more difficult to contemplate "eternal life" (1 John 1,2). However, this is also the scandal of contemplating eternal life in the crucified one.

- John described the journey of those who do not know the incarnate God. They are children of the devil, that is, divided persons who deceive and kill (John 8,44). They are new "Cains" who hate their brothers and sisters (1 John 3,12-13), who close their hearts before the needs of others (1 John 3,17). They do not practice justice (1 John 3,10), thus living in death (1 John 3,14) and multiplying death.

These false spiritualities use the language of money and arrogance (1 John 2,16); because they are of the world, the world listens to them (1 John 4,5).

- *"This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God..."* (1 John 4,2). This "mortal flesh" is what created difficulties for the Christians of John's community, as it does for us.

In the third chapter, John describes the way of those who discover God in the mortal flesh of Jesus of Nazareth, and consequently in all people. They open their hearts to the needs of others; as a result, they share their goods (1 John 3,17). But this is not all; they also practice justice (3,17) in solidarity with the poor and the displaced. In a world where there are "Cains" who kill the just (3,12), they are ready to lay down their very lives as Jesus did (3,16).

- This external journey of love towards God, discovered in our brothers and sisters, also has an interior itinerary.

The first fruit is peace. Loving *"with actions and in truth"* (3,18) *"...we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and He knows everything"* (3,19-

20). Our interior culpability disappears in the truth of our love for our brothers and sisters. This experience gives birth to confidence. The love that "*God has for us*" (4,16) leads us to confide in him. True love leaves no room for fear. Fear can appear in many ways in our mortal flesh, and we can suffer it to the point of anguish like Jesus in the Garden. But fear is not the ultimate truth which guides our lives. Even if there is a strong interior struggle, "*perfect love casts out fear*" (4,18); it resides at the center of our lives, leading us towards works of justice.

- This process draws us to the heart of true knowledge of God (1,2), and of his inspirations.

Speaking of this experience, John uses a series of surprisingly profound expressions: "[they] *live in him and He in them*" (3,24). "*We are from God...*" (4,6) "*God lives in him and he in God...*" (4,15). The understanding of this language resides on the horizon between an inexhaustible intimacy with God and an ever-growing love for our brothers and sisters; these two dimensions cannot be separated.

In this "knowledge" which embraces the whole person, we journey forward until the day that we see Jesus "*as He is*" and thus we will be like Him, because, "*what we shall be in the future has not yet been revealed*" (3,2).

- Thus, our discerning the experience of God in our prayer life, must go beyond the scandal of the "*mortal flesh*" of Jesus and of all our brothers and sisters, especially the poorest and the crucified. The search for spiritual "ways" is always a threat to us, if it does not pass through the reality of the crucified bodies of the poor and of our own surrender to the truth of the journey that leads to Jerusalem.

If we truly contemplate "eternal life" in Jesus crucified and in the oppressed, then we must be witnesses both by our commitment to justice (3,10), as by our peace, the peace of a person who "abides" in God.



IX

The pedagogy of a prayer life

“Lord, teach us to pray”

When the disciples saw Jesus returning from prayer, they perceived something in him that moved them to ask him to teach them to pray, as John had taught his disciples (Luke 11,1).

Starting with the Church's experience of prayer, a “wisdom” has been accumulated which nourishes us today. Yet each era has its own new challenges, and we must pray each day in the right place, there where life begins, where God is creating the future with us.

Life among the poor offers unique possibilities for meeting God. At the same time it demands a deep prayer life which leads to building persons and communities capable of living creatively the great challenges of this commitment.

I would like to offer some ideas regarding the pedagogy of prayer which might help us. They are taken from more or less personal experiences which I think are positive.

Following what they were taught by Judaism as children, Jesus' disciples already knew how to pray. But they discovered something new in Jesus and they asked him to teach them to pray as they lived out their commitment to the Kingdom.

The land of the hundredfold

The exodus experienced by religious life in these last years — going towards the marginalized in the inner cities and towards the poor peasants — has influenced the location of houses of formation which have been implanted in these poor areas.

Nonetheless, we avoided placing houses of formation in places that were extremely difficult because of their marginality. There is the risk that such difficulties absorb the person so completely that other dimensions of formation are left in the shadows. These dimensions cannot be neglected; otherwise sooner or later, if the foundations lack solidity, they will collapse.

However, by residing in poor neighborhoods we will have put ourselves on privileged ground where we encounter God, and come to an understanding of a “world” opposed to the Gospel, and an understanding of ourselves.

Thus, we do not meet the poor only occasionally. In a geographic sense we live among the poor and it is in their midst that we become religious and find our identity.

Our relationship with the poor has distinct levels. With some it is a relationship of *neighbor*, a word that has almost no significance for city dwellers, sealed up in their apartments in large buildings, or isolated in their individual houses by fences and gardens. In poor neighborhoods, where close relationships of solidarity are necessary for survival, the neighbor is one’s “real family.”

Another distinct level is *friendship*. Through a concrete, friendly relationship with the poor we share history as life becomes incarnated in names and faces. Moreover, in this relationship, we are admitted into the intimacy of a culture with all its values and wounds.

The Christian community opens to another new dimension in belonging to the world of the poor. Here, faith is expressed in catechesis,



in the celebration of the sacraments, and in different manifestations of popular religiosity. The people's faith, strong and unwavering in spite of so much suffering, and the celebrations that take place in the midst of this suffering, strengthen the faith of the religious. A relationship of pastoral work is established where contemplating, listening, admiring and welcoming are far more important than "teaching;" thus, we are purified together by sharing a more evangelical faith.

Other popular organizations exist that we can join if we find it helpful, according to the phase in which we find ourselves.

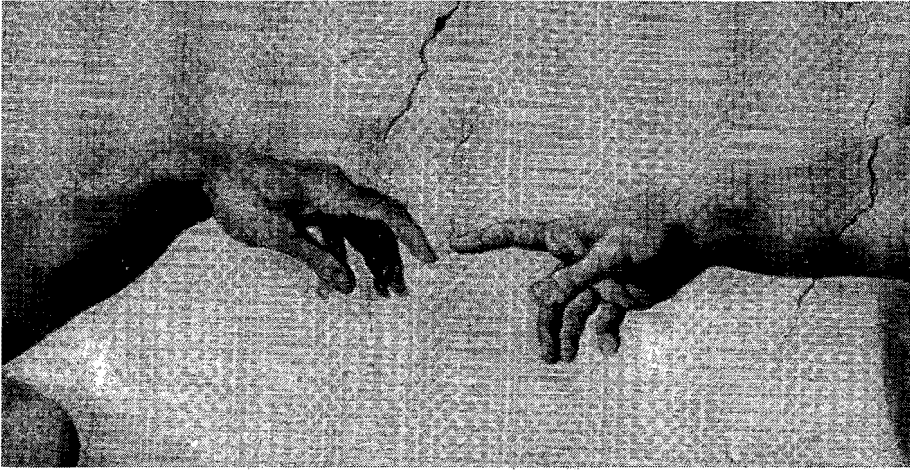
We can develop our religious personality by "belonging" in a certain manner to the world of the poor. But, here again, the initial steps of formation call for much time and solitude to bring about a deep meeting with our own personal reality before God.

Total abandonment to God and the Kingdom in solidarity with the poor must be established in our hearts; this is the fruit of an intense relationship with God. God alone can offer and demand from us a life lived in solidarity with the oppressed.

The fact that religious life has its beginning among the poor does not imply that the religious will necessarily work directly with the poor in the future. In the poorest countries many do, but those who work with other social classes can measure their lives and their activities with the realities of the poor which became a part of their relationship with God at the beginning of their religious commitment: this is at the very roots of their religious identity. The poor as a person and not only as a number or a distant concept will be a living point of reference, an inexhaustible fountain of questioning and of hope for creating the Kingdom of God.

The roots of each life

When a young person enters into religious life, his or her relationship with God already has a history. There is no better way to learn to pray than to recognize the Good News in one's life.



*I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness;
I will take hold of your hand.
I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and
a light for the Gentiles. (Is. 42,6)*

Before giving wonderful teachings about prayer, we must know, express and respect the unique way God has called, taken by the hand, and formed each person. God respects our total reality and our rhythm of life. This holds true whether we belong to the peasant, working-class or middle-class culture. By continuing this work of God, each seeks to help the seed, sown by the Spirit, to grow with its own specific roots.

Looking at our lives and following the leitmotif of our experience of God opens our reflections to unsuspected worlds. In addition, it permits us to continue discovering keys to the language God uses in communicating with each person and with each new generation of youth called to religious life.

It inspires admiration for the almost anonymous presence of God along the course of life's journey. All the discretion of God is revealed; this discovery leads us to pray and to bring to light this relationship hidden in God's surprising respect for us.

Discovering the discretion of God

Throughout the Bible, we see the pedagogy of God who leads people to clarify certain areas of their lives by asking them a question.

To Adam, lost in the fear of separation, God asks: "*Where are you?*" (Gen. 3,9) To Cain, with the weight of his crime hanging over his head, God asks: "*Where is your brother...?*" (Gen. 4,9) And to Paul, whose heart burns with aggression and death, God asks: "*...why do you persecute me?*"

Some simple questions were given to help us discover the history of our relationship with God who has taken us by the hand and led us to today. Later, this same relationship will move towards deeper levels of life. God does not let go the hands he took one day when making a "covenant with his people."

- **How have you experienced God in *creation*?**

Each was to meditate this question in prayer. After two or three days we met in a group to share what we had discovered. A young peasant shared how each morning, as he walked the long road to school, he saw the dawn which he contemplated as a call from God to live fully with a grateful heart. An exploited laborer, working the night-shift in a factory, spoke of contemplating the starry sky in moments of rest as a call towards a new heaven and a new earth while fighting for justice. Others spoke of flowing rivers, of an endless sea, or of work in the fields on the land of others.

Thus, creation is seen as a call from God both to be admired, allowing it to re-create us, or a task to be carried out: freeing it from injustice. This call reaches each of us in a deeply personal way and remains a strong symbol throughout the years.

- **How have you encountered God in *others*?**

For a few days each person thought about their relationships with others trying to discover moments where the absolute has sudden-

ly shone through other persons. The poor we are helping, a catechist who transmits faith and then slips away into the anonymity of a discreet generosity, an advocate of justice, a union leader or a child who sells peanuts... all can be the face of God.

When the "other" is an enemy, he or she appears as a call to reconciliation; when a stranger, to question my comfort or to widen my horizons; when a neighbor, as a call to grateful communion; when poor and oppressed, as a call to commit myself to liberation.

It is important that the "other" becomes a sacrament of a meeting with God. In certain moments this meeting radically upsets my life. When we give a concrete name to these meetings, the horizons of each are widened and new sources of inspiration open to everyone.

- **How have you experienced God as *you work for transforming structures*?**

The young enter religious life with some experience of working in groups, communities, political parties, etc.

Some have gone from their religious experience to a commitment to build a just world. Others have walked the opposite road: as they deepened their roots and the goal of their sociopolitical engagement, they have met Jesus of Nazareth as the true way of liberation.

In both cases, they have in some way perceived the connection between the experience of God and the transformation of reality. We cannot separate God from this history that has been placed in our hands. God is permanently engaged in bringing it to fullness. Whoever fights injustice can meet him.

- **How have you experienced God in *popular religiosity*?**

Some vocations come from peasant cultures where there are many manifestations of popular religiosity: exhausting pilgrimages, the "way of the cross" through the fields, holy hours in the homes, and a

universe populated by angels and devils whose concrete deeds are passed down from one to the other.

Other vocations come from tough urban areas, where the analyses of reality are strongly colored by political ideologies. They only vaguely remember popular religiosity, which has been preserved among the older people, and saved from the ruins of their rural life as it impacted with the city.

As they search to discover the roots of their participation in popular religiosity, or of their aversion to it as something alienating, a process of sharing begins which leads the group to discover the faith values that exist in these practices. At the same time, there is a purification of the less evangelical elements. Thus, some young religious will learn to pray with the people, while others will be more critical of the religious vision that they carry within them.

● **How have you experienced God in the Church's *sacramental celebrations*?**

Here we encounter a great variety of cases. Some come from parishes that are traditional both in dogma and liturgy; some from parishes where there is strong participation of the faithful. Others come from educative institutions where their commitment matured without much connection with their parish, while some are from parishes totally disconnected from the dramas of everyday life, and thus they have known few conflicts.

Discovering the sacraments of ordinary life is an important step forward in understanding and living the sacraments of the ecclesial community. It is a meeting with God in a liberating history which moves towards the fullness of the Kingdom.

Born in community life and in apostolic commitment, and enriched by the ordinary "sacraments of life," the daily celebration of the Eucharist helps us to grow in our sacramental relationship with God.

- **How do you experience God *within yourself*?**

All these experiences of God, coming from such different outer sources, converge within us. There they become integrated into one countenance which dialogues with us in an absolutely original manner and takes completely new initiatives according to the unique mission God has destined for each of us, a mission for which he prepares us and conducts us.

The images we each have of God — our perceptions, our vocabulary and our symbols — are all original. As “a devouring fire,” as “water of eternal life,” as “light”... How do you perceive and express the active presence of God within you?

- **What *difficulties* do you encounter in prayer and how do you face them?**

Difficulties will inevitably arise in our prayer life. Some are more relevant to one generation like the fear of solitude and of silence when the young arrive intoxicated with images and noise. Others are more personal like the remembrances of old wounds which rise up in the silence. Finally, others are shared by the majority: distractions, boredom, temptations, not knowing what to do with so-called “bad” thoughts, etc.

It can be a great help to share the difficulties which everyone faces and their way of handling them. There is an unspoken agreement to help one another in overcoming obstacles which cause problems in times of prayer, for example, noise, etc.

In any case, the “resistances” to our encounter with God make sense, and little by little we learn to discern them and to face them. The path of “resistances” is also the path towards a meeting with God on an ever-deepening level.

- **What does *praying* mean to you?**

At the end of our journey, we arrive at the question that can summarize the whole process: How can each of us formulate a response?

The different emphases reveal much of each person's relationship with God at the moment of the encounter with him and permit us to put order into all the previous information about what prayer is.

The community teaches how to pray

The journey described previously permits us to discover more and more the discreet presence of God in our own lives. To advance in an ever-deepening life of prayer, we need to create a community that is really a hearth of prayer.

After individually applying the above questions to our personal life, they were shared in community in prayer. We could express what we had started to discover even though it was with awkward vocabulary.

Still, it is just as important to listen to others speak of their experience as it is to share our own. This exchange, either similar or contrasting, opens new horizons for everyone.

When we finished sharing each question, the guide gave some directives to help deepen the experience of God in that particular area.

This type of communication also opens us to dialogue outside the meetings where sharing can be done on a deeper level, especially with the guide. Not everything can be expressed in public. The spiritual experience is broader than we can perceive or express. Yet learning to know and express it helps in discerning it so that we can understand where God is leading us.

This communication process at such personal levels in the community is a great help in building a rapport with one another. The capacity, to listen and respect with a contemplative gaze, helps prepare sound relationships on other levels of ordinary life.

Four dimensions of one and the same encounter

If we want all the life described earlier to be more and more a meeting with God, we can focus it on four large nucleuses that are connected in a living synthesis.

This synthesis gives impetus and harmony to those who walk with God. Intimacy filled with presence opens to active commitment. Contemplation does not get lost in an interior paradise but rather prepares the opening entrusted to it by true discernment. Abandonment to the mystery of God does not make us passive but rather sends us on mission for the Kingdom. Combat in history does not distract us from an encounter with God but rather causes us to walk with him.

- ***Personal contemplation***

This is the form of prayer in which we meet God in the depths of our own hearts. In a strictly personal way we move towards an ever more intense union with God, a union manifested as much in surrender in prayer as in gratuitous service for the Kingdom. The majority of prayer methods refer to this kind of contemplation.

- ***Prayer of discernment***

This seeks to discover what God asks of us for the building of the Kingdom. To do this, we must interpret the signs of the times to recognize the newness that is being born as God's work in history. Among all the impulses moving within us, we must discover those that come from God, to know where we are being led, and what is the just and precise collaboration that is being asked of us in any determined moment.

Contemplative prayer prepares me to open my heart to the work of God. In the building of the Kingdom I want to do what God asks of me.

- ***Contemplation in action***

We seek to live our working for the Kingdom as a relationship with God, who is also committed to us.

To meet God in every person and in every situation, we must carry out what we have discerned as his will. At the same time, reality will become transparent and we will be able to see God through the

“clay” of our reality. Thus, the world will be filled with evidence that unites us in our work and speak to us continuously of the presence of the Lord of history who walks by our side.

- ***Community prayer***

Commitment creates community at the service of the Kingdom and is already a sign in the present world, of this fullness of communion towards which we are going. When we meet to pray and celebrate the Eucharist, all this fullness is festively announced in history.

We do not only celebrate within religious communities. We unite ourselves to the people in the Eucharist, or in other forms of celebration where, having their own style and song, they fully express themselves and feel fully creative.

- ***Different ways towards the same goal***

In books of prayer we can find different methods that help us to meet God and to pray. According to our stage in life, our way of being, and our different cultures, some books are more useful than others. Knowing them can help us to move towards the same goal with our whole being, “to surrender ourselves to God” (K.Rahner), Father of goodness and nearness, as revealed to us by Jesus of Nazareth. In God’s hands rests the mystery of our being and that of history.

- ***A family likeness***

Each religious family has its charism, its specific way of drawing near to God and of making him present among the people. Thus it reflects a unique initiative of the inexhaustible God.

In these pages we have pointed out some aspects that can help us to pray today in this new life with the poor. All religious share the same challenge, but each Congregation has its own language, elaborated through the years. It remembers numerous resolutions born from its charism and other manifestations of its identity. In this way opened by the Spirit, it tries to welcome new life.

● *Accompaniment in the meeting with God*

The heart of spiritual direction takes place in the meeting between the person accompanied and God. The whole person is built on this unique relationship.

In the first stages, the accompanier must pay attention to teaching the life of prayer with all its possibilities and its snares. Little by little a story is written of a relationship between God and the person where it is necessary to discover and take in all the newness which comes. In a certain sense, the accompanier becomes the memory of this process.

To help to pray in this brand new moment of religious life and of the Church committed to the poor, the accompanier, too, must accept the challenge so that all those he\she intends to accompany will find there a resonance that no science can give. The one accompanied will clearly see if the accompanier is giving recipes or is witnessing to an experience that goes beyond language.

Be that as it may, this spiritual experience will prove to be a welcomed space where words and signs try to express the meeting with God even though God's immensity can never be envisioned.

In this exchange, the accompanier is not a distant, aseptic expert who has designed maps beforehand in order to lead persons along roads that he\she alone knows. The accompanier, too, can be happily surprised by the way that God manifests himself today and the transparency with which the new generations perceive God and surrender to him. Today, certain words and symbols have become extinct while others are being born in the depths of God's people.

If we do not allow ourselves to be surprised by the newness of God, it will be impossible for us to accompany others without harming them. It would be like wanting to put new wine into old wineskins which have not experienced the Easter which today is renewing everything, starting with the poor of the earth.

Picture Sources

- Sr. M. Armgard - Kloster Reute, Germany, p.3*
Ernst Barlach - Germany, pp.35, 75, 82
Henning Christoph - Missio, Aachen, Germany, p.26
Cursillo, Haus St. Jakobus - Oberdischingen, Germany, p.84
Gherardo Delle Notti - Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, Italy, p.54
Fachakademie St. Anna - Würzburg, Germany, pp.20, 50
Rolf Kunisch - Münster/Altheim, Germany, p.24
Roman Sarcophagus - 4th Century, Vatican, p.29
Maria Magdalena - St. Marienkirche, Rostock, Germany, p.68
Michelangelo - Sistine Chapel, Vatican, p.101
Missionari Saveriani - Parma, Italy, pp.10, 70, 99
Fr. Nagy, SJ - SJ Curia Garden, Rome, Italy, p.90
Lothar Nahler - Hillesheim, Germany, p.56
Pax Christi Church - Essen, Germany, p.22
Pont. Opere Missionarie - Rome, Italy, p.96
Pontis - München, Germany, p.40
Sieger Köder - Germany, pp.63, 66

The Spanish Jesuit Benjamín González Buelta, S.J. has lived and worked in Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic since 1965. Along with a group of other pastoral workers, he decided to share life with the poor of the favela living in the same conditions. There are about 80,000 people in less than two square kilometers.

Some years after living in the favela, Fr. Buelta wrote down his reflections and those of his companions. "Come Down to Meet God" gives expression to the life of prayer of many religious and laypeople who live among the poor, committed to the process of liberation.

