

## 8. The fundamental desire

We could summarize the journey we've made so far, inspired by the three inscriptions of the church of Chau Son Nord, by saying that the desire to be with God, drawn by the gift of his presence, when it meets Christ, becomes an experience of fullness, of paradise, of eternal life.

To give depth and artistic clarity to this process, which takes our whole life and should be the living and burning, that is radiant, soul of our monastic communities, I have thought to meditate with you on a musical work that you certainly all know but that we risk hearing without stopping ourselves to taste its deep meaning. It is the motet *Sicut cervus* of the great composer of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina. The motet takes up the beginning of Psalm 42: "*Sicut cervus desiderat ad fontes aquarum: ita desiderat anima mea ad te, Deus*" – As the deer desires the springs of water: so my soul desires you, O God."

Let's listen to it: Palestrina - *Sicut cervus* - The Cambridge Singers

In the motet of Palestrina, what strike me, or rather take me and captivate me, are three things.

The first is how Palestrina has the word "*desiderat*" sung, which is repeated many times, multiplied by the four voices. It is as if each time the music descended to take up the first syllable, "*de*," down low, in the bass, to rise up at each following syllable toward the height. Perhaps not in a linear way: like the last time that "*desiderat*" is sung – for me the most emotional part of the motet –: there the basses come back up to take the "*de*" of the third syllable. But practically always the fourth syllable, "*rat*," is up high.

This will be a somewhat unsophisticated analysis, by someone who understands music little, but for me this expresses just how important it is that our desire climb up from the bass, from the depth of our humanity. The music is like the Holy Spirit who, full of compassion, as St. Paul writes to the Romans, "helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words" (Rom 8:26). The Spirit descends, that is, to lift up our human condition, drawing it out and lifting it toward the stars.

In fact, the etymology of "desire" is the compound of the particle "*de*," a prefix that indicates a lack, privation, distance, and of "*sidus*," which is a star, symbol of the infinite that surpasses us, that stands on high and which we feel the distance like an incurable wound. But see that Palestrina descends to our lack, the "*de*," and from note to note expresses the lifting up of desire. And the Spirit does this because it wants to bring man on high, to lift up our humanity, our heart in which is concentrated the awareness of all reality, without leaving anything behind.

In fact, Psalm 42 at a certain point says:

"Deep is calling on deep,  
in the roar of your torrents;  
your billows and all your waves  
swept over me." (Ps 42:8)

The deep abyss of the Mystery calls on the deep of the human heart, which is like a mirrored depth before the infinite depth of God. An abyss of wretchedness before the abyss of Mercy, as St. Augustine describes the meeting between the adulterous woman and Jesus when they are left alone in the piazza at midday (cf. Jn 8:9–11). But the abyss of the Mystery “calls on” the abyss of our fallen humanity. The Greek Bible, followed by the Vulgate, does not say: “in the roar of your torrents,” but “at the voice of your waterfalls – *voce cataractarum tuarum*.” From the abyss of the mystery of God a voice comes down, powerful like the torrent of a waterfall, to call on a depth of ourselves that is deeper than ourselves. And it is a voice that overwhelms us, as if it filled up the empty abyss into which we have sunk. But it is not water, it is a voice, it is a sound, a song. It is as if Palestrina had understood that he had to put into the “*desiderat*” the echo of this voice, as if the call of God, descending into the depth, had bounced off the “*de*” and risen toward the high abyss of the Mystery.

They have told me that someone who swims in the Rhein at Basel can find eddies that suck you below the water. Then, the good method is not to wear oneself out to remain afloat, which makes the situation worse, but to let oneself be absorbed by the whirlpool to the point of touching the bed of the river and so give oneself a push toward the surface and continue to swim, overcoming the danger.

This is desire! Desire is like the echo that the voice of the abyss of the good Mystery that desires us to be with itself, that desires to lift us back up to itself, creates in the abyss of our poverty, of our solitude, of our lack, distance and sadness.

It is like when a father picks up his baby, and to make it happy lifts it up higher than his height, while still holding it firmly under the arms. For what interests the baby is not the thrill of being thrown on high, into the void, but of being able to feel the height that the firm hold of the father enables it to reach. The baby likes to feel the flight that it can accomplish without separating itself from its father. In other words, the baby is interested in being able to feel in total confidence the height, the breadth, and the depth that the father’s embrace gives to his life.

The adolescent will need to seek height, breadth, and depth outside the embrace of his parents, outside the hold of authority. And that’s fine, it is necessary. But sooner or later, today rather later than sooner, a person’s maturity grows deeper when, as Jesus says, it is converted to become like babies, in relationship with God and with the community: freely aware that the height, the breadth, and the depth of life are found more in belonging, in fidelity, than in independence for its own sake.