

9. Desire is a response

“Deep is calling on deep, in the roar of your torrents” (Ps 42:8).

In us desire is always a response, because God calls us to himself from the very moment he creates us. We desire because we have been created, because there is a voice that calls us and calls us again, a voice that often is “the sound of a low breeze” (1 Kings 19:12), or indeed a “roar of torrents.” But this voice always calls up the response of desire; this voice always gives rise, if perceived, to the echo of the abyss of our desire. A desire that lifts itself up in us, like a flame that is kindled, or better, that is relighted, rekindled by a gust of wind. The desire that comes up from the human heart, like the note of the *Sicut cervus* of Palestrina, *is a response*, and hence is always a desire for someone, a response to someone who calls us.

A desire that, instead, would get lost in vague Romantic and melancholic sentiment would be like a response that is lost in the wind, as Bob Dylan sang: “*The answer, my friend, is blowin’ in the wind*,” an answer that does not reach one who, calling us, has asked us the question of our life, has created our heart as a question about Him.

A student shared with me an amazing poem by the Italian poet Giorgio Caproni:

“We all receive a gift. / Then, we no longer remember / either from whom or what it is. / We just preserve of it / – pointed and without remission – / the thorn of nostalgia.” (*Generalizzando*; from *Res amissa*, 1991).

See, in order not to stop there, at a nostalgia that torments us like a thorn, to not get enclosed in a melancholic sadness that lives out the lack without desiring the fullness, we must start back over from a silence, from listening, from an ear pointed toward the voice of the abyss of the mystery of God who calls on the abyss of the mystery of our heart.

“Today, hear his voice: do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness” (Ps 95:8). This is the invitation of the invitatory psalm which according to the Rule of St. Benedict should open the divine Office each day, between night and morning. Each day is a rebirth if we reawaken the desire that responds to the voice of the abyss of God who calls on us.

There is no worse beginning to the day than to start off with hearing any other voice that is not that of the Mystery that calls on us to live in order to be with Him. How many times we wake up hearing the voice of our preoccupations, the problems that we have with others, or hearing the voice of the anger for an injustice or hostility we are undergoing, or the voice of our claims and ambitions, or of our ideas and convictions that are in conflict with those of others. We get up, that is, without obedience, in the etymological sense of *ob-audire*, that is of “listening before someone,” of paying attention to an Other.

We wake up listening to ourselves, instead of waking up like the bride of the Song of Songs:

“The voice of my beloved! [...]
My beloved speaks and says to me: [...]
‘Arise, my love, my beautiful one,
and come away,

O my dove, in the clefts of the rock,
in the crannies of the cliff,
let me see your face,
let me hear your voice,
for your voice is sweet,
and your face is lovely.” (Song 2:8–14)

How lovely it would be to be able to wake up that way every morning, hearing the voice of Jesus who promises us the beauty of everything if only we listen to Him, receive Him, follow Him! How lovely it would be to abandon oneself to the burning desire of God who desires a hearing, a standing with our whole selves before Him who calls us!

We are hidden in the clefts of the rock in which every human life comes to find itself folded in on itself. Outside an infinite Love calls us, a wild passion for us, for a relationship with us, a burning desire to hear our voice and to contemplate our face; a Love that, because it belongs to Him who creates us, is for us like a light that would make the sweetness of our voice resound fully, that is of our self-expression, and would make the true beauty of our face fully glow, that is of our being before Him and before everyone and everything.

I think of the young people who, in the terrible fire of the first of January in Crans Montana, in Switzerland, lost their face, the beauty of their face. They lost their face and their hands, that which visibly defines a person before others. How important it is to pray that these youths discover that our true face is not what we see in the mirror, but is hidden in God’s gaze upon us, in the Father’s loving gaze upon us. That is what we monks and nuns should discover, live out, and bear witness to first of all and every day, to be a sign of contradiction, full of positive proposal, in this narcissistic world in which people define themselves only in front of a mirror.

Just as the refrain of Psalms 42 and 43 pray: “Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my saving presence and my God” (Ps 42:5,11; 43:5)

If responding to his call, to our vocation, is not this, is not like this, what is its point? What is the point for my humanity of following a vocation, whatever it be, to virginity or matrimony, or to something else, if my “yes” is not given to letting Christ make this beauty emerge in us, among us, and before the whole world, this beauty that is a reflection of His own, the beauty that we are in the eyes of His love, of His compassion? The beauty that Christ made emerge in John, Andrew, Peter, Mary Magdalene, the Samaritan woman, in Zacchaeus, and in all people whom he encountered.

Every time that we pray the *Angelus* or pray before an image of the Mother of God, as one does when in all Cistercian monasteries is sung each evening the *Salve Regina*, we should think of the crystal-clear correspondence of Our Lady to this passion of the Lord for us – not for nothing does the Liturgy employ the Song of Songs to venerate the Virgin Mary –, and we should unite ourselves to the perfection of her “being” before Him, so that through her motherhood the Spirit can create in us our true face as children of the Father.