

10. Experiencing the *Magnificat*

In the motet of Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina, after the great and fundamental, or rather founding insistence on the word “*desiderat*,” at a certain point while the basses are still singing and repeating “*desiderat*” for the last time, the word “*anima*,” the subject of the desire, as announced by the comparison of the thirsting deer, finds itself as it were catapulted into the highest notes of the sopranos, and it gets sung with long notes, in particular the two *a*’s. It is as if, having reached halfway, the soul had expanded, tasted the whole height and vastness of its nature, of its capacity for fullness.

But suddenly, the “*mea*” comes down and is prolonged, as if the soul were amazed to have reached so far on high and said to itself: “Really me, really *my* soul, is capable of this, is so elevated on high by its desire?!”

Certainly at this point Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina thought of the *Magnificat*, that is, of the soul of the Virgin Mary who, taking notice of what was happening to her, of the event that was taking her up and lifting her from the depth of her humility as a servant, reaches an incredible relationship with the Mystery, with God, with the presence of God.

The soul of Mary finds itself capable of *magnifying* the Lord, literally of “making the Lord bigger,” of expanding in the sight of the God whom it has always desired, for whom it always longed, as the thirsty deer desires to drink at the spring of its life, of its joy, of its nature thirsting for the infinite. The abyss of human misery is made capable of expanding to the measure without measure of God’s greatness.

St. Benedict has a very beautiful phrase in the Prologue of the Rule in which he alludes to the *Magnificat* of Mary that is born in the heart of those who, indeed thanks to the fear of God, recognize in themselves the merciful work of a God who is present: “*Timentes Dominum [...] operantem in se Dominum magnificant* – Those who fear the Lord [...] magnify the Lord working in them” (Prol. 29–30).

In the *Sicut cervus* of Palestrina, it is as if the soul, that is the human heart, had found its fullness in the very fact of desiring the presence of Him who creates her. Right when the sopranos are already tasting and prolonging the fullness of awareness that the soul has of itself, of its greatness, of the expansion of self in magnifying the Lord, the basses, exactly below in the score, are still singing, repeating it twice: “*desiderat, desiderat.*”

The human heart is made in such a way that when it becomes aware of and experiences being created to desire God, there is born something like a coinciding of desire and fullness, of need and completion, a coinciding of the abyss of man and the abyss of God. The heart discovers that it is enough to desire God to possess him, to know him by experience, because the desire is already wholly a space for Him, it is wholly a space that He created in us for Him, and for Him alone.

The feeling of lacking God that we experience is, in us, the whole space of God, wholly for Him, that nothing and no one manages to occupy if He does not come, if He is not here. Desire in us is like the trace of the eternal in our finitude.

The desire aware of being fulfilled only in the presence of God is the fullness of man, a fullness of grace that the coming of Jesus Christ, the incarnation of the Word, totally completes. The *VOLO TECUM* is already *PARADISUS* because Jesus is already there and begs for communion with us, attracting us in silence. For that reason the whole human being, which continually repeats "*sicut cervus desiderat, desiderat, desiderat... ad fontes aquarum,*" when it becomes aware of itself, of this desire that animates everything, all its relationships, all its actions, all its thoughts, all its words, all its feelings, the whole human being, if taken seriously in this, if cared for in this, becomes the space in which the soul has an experience that is gracious, because it is an experience of grace, because it is gratuitous, of fulfillment, of a greatness in itself infinite, that is, of paradise.

But what is fulfillment, what is it like?

This is the third aspect that strikes me, for how it is expressed in the motet of Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina.

The fulfillment is a You, the You of God! The soul is found on high, expanded in the awe of seeing fulfilled its desire that is piercing, thirsting, that, if not satisfied, the soul dies, dies of thirst. And up there, on that profound height, culmination of human experience, of the experience that we can define as "mystical," because it is an experience of the mystery of man in the mystery of God, up there it is as if the soul stopped, stopped in rest. First it repeats two times: "*ad te Deus,*" as if stopping first at the discovery of itself as "being made for God," "being made *ad te Deus*, made stretched toward God." As if the soul said: "I did not know I was made for You, that all my desire, all my worry, my anxiety and fear of dying of thirst, was a symbol of my being made *ad Te*, toward You, for You. I thought it was a defect, a lack, a diminution of my being, a wretchedness of my nature: all was *ad te, Deus!*"

How many kinds of restlessness experienced, suffered, for example in adolescence, seemed to be a defect, while around us everyone seemed to be fine, to be at their ease in life, and we felt like the ugly duckling. There are sufferings and wounds in our life, from our infancy on, with which one fine day we feel reconciled, which we even bless, because we find that they were and are *ad Te, Deus!*

When the other voices follow them in repeating and modulating "*ita anima mea ad te Deus,*" the sopranos stop to hold through to the end, for four measures, the *u* of "*Deus,*" on the same note, as if they did not want to stop tasting and contemplating God as the end and fulfillment of the desire of life.

But we can also think that the sopranos prolong the note to wait for the other voices to meet up in the last two measures and stand still on the same vowel, to form together, in the last measure, a harmonious accord, tasting the common peace of being fulfilled in the YOU of God toward which we have all be made, and which has as it were awaited us through the modulations of our differences, of all our diverse rhythms and heights, through all our and others' ascents and descents, through our

conflicts during the journey that, notwithstanding all this, or thanks to all this, we have made together.

We discover that the repose of the soul in God, in the YOU who has attracted its thirst, is shared, unifying, a source of communion. Where the soul of each person is quenched at the original Source, where everyone finds the others, all the others, in the beauty and harmony of one communion, of a brotherhood, of being made for each other, which is grace, which is a gift of Him who makes us for Himself. It is a rest in God and a rest among us; a reconciliation with God and a reconciliation among us. We discover that communion with God coincides with communion among us, and this too is beautiful, this too stirs amazement, expands the soul. The soul embraces the Father and finds itself embracing the brother, the sister, who perhaps was indifferent to us or even an enemy. Being with Jesus is truly paradise, but a paradise of fraternal communion.