

23. The prayer of a desperate man

In the three days between his fall on the road of Damascus and the visit of Ananias, Saul experiences nothingness. The Acts of the Apostles describe him in a very sober verse: “For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank” (Acts 9:9). Jesus wanted to meet him in death, in the underworld, as he met Adam and Eve on Holy Saturday. In the darkness, without eating and drinking: Saul is as if dead, he is like a corpse. He will not be able to stay alive except by rising from death, except by holding onto the hand of the Risen One who is descending toward him.

Jesus says to Ananias that, notwithstanding everything, Saul is praying: “Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying” (Acts 9:11).

How can a man pray in the underworld, a man fallen into the tomb of total abandonment, who has seen the whole meaning of his life collapse? He can only pray like Jesus does on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (MT 27:46; Ps 22:1).

Saul is begging for salvation, begs for God to save him, that he come to save him. He had never prayed like that. He was always convinced that he was already saved, and that all the others who were not like him were damned. Now he feels damned and awaits a salvation that he knows, because it has been promised by God to his people, but which he realizes he has never met. He has met Jesus on the road to Damascus, but that light made him blind. His Savior suddenly abandoned him. Why? Because he had to experience that our salvation is a resurrection, a being taken by the hand by the Risen One, who lifts us from the darkness of death and of sin. And he also had to experience that this hand that the risen Savior extends to us is the Church, the Body of which the Risen One, seated at the right hand of the Father, is the Head.

Jesus explains to Ananias that, while he was praying, Saul “has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight” (Acts 9:12).

To obtain the resurrection of his life, Saul must be humbled to await a poor member of the Body of Christ, all fearful and certainly not educated and intelligent like he was. Saul was habituated to the everything right now of his fanatical efforts: he immediately obtained letters from the high priest and absolute power to persecute Christians. But behold, he has to wait in the dark for some disciple to come to him who has received from God the power to heal him. True hope grows in the dramatic expectation that fills up the moments of desperation from which we are not capable of saving ourselves, with our own forces and our relationships.

Saul understands forever that true prayer, true faith, true hope consist in remaining within this need of being saved by an Other, within the need to rediscover life and light thanks to an Other, an Other who is so other that he comes to us through other poor desperate people like ourselves.

For the rest of his life Paul will have to live in continual hope for the grace communicated by the Risen one. As he will write to the Corinthians:

“So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” (2 Cor 12:7–10)

It is by starting from this awareness that we understand that hope is not a superfluous virtue, like a knick-knack, but is the heart of our relationship with the mystery of the risen Christ, our Savior. Living in hope means living in this awareness that only Christ saves us, that there is no other Name – that is no other presence and person – in which we can be saved (cf. Acts 4:12).

Truly hoping means asking Christ to be the resurrection and the life of our life, of our vocation, of our community, of the Church, of all humanity, of the whole universe.

Do we have this hope? Is this hope seen in us? Are we prophets, witnesses of this hope against hope, stronger than every death, than every sin, than every abandonment, than every physical, psychic, moral weakness?

We can be, if hope becomes incarnate in us in a prayer that begs Christ the Redeemer unceasingly.

While I found myself at *Notre Dame des Neiges*, the local Bishop handed me a copy of the original text from the writings of St. Charles de Foucauld in which his famous prayer of abandonment to the Father is found, a prayer translated into all languages, in a faithful version even if a little reduced with respect to the original:

“Father,
I abandon myself into your hands;
do with me what you will.
Whatever you may do,
I thank you.
I am ready for all, I accept all.
Let only your will be done in me,
and in all your creatures.
I wish no more than this, O Lord.
Into your hands I commend my soul;
I offer it to you
with all the love of my heart,
for I love you, Lord,
and so need to give myself,
to surrender myself into your hands,
without reserve,
and with boundless confidence,
for you are my Father.”

In this copy of the original manuscript, I discovered that Br. Charles of Jesus composed this prayer while meditating on the prayer of Christ on the Cross: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (Lk 23:46).

The prayer of abandonment expresses, then, St. Charles’s desire to enter into the prayer of Jesus to the Father, to make it his own, to let it penetrate into his life and let his life penetrate into the prayer of Jesus. In fact, immediately before writing this prayer of abandonment and hope in the Father, St. Charles notes: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit”... It is the final prayer of our Master, of our well-Beloved... That it could be our own... And that it be not only that of our last moment, but of our every instant.”¹

Thus hope becomes like the breath of each moment of life, a breath of confident abandonment to the Father that offers him all that we are, our whole life, all that remains to us even when we have lost everything, like Jesus on the cross. The spirit is in us the deep mystery of our being, it is the life-breath that God, in creating us, puts within us. More than just air to breathe, the spirit is the life that God puts in us so we can be the image and likeness of the Trinity, capable, that is, of loving as we are loved. The last breath of a person who dies is a symbol of a last act of love, the last in the time of life which, however, since it is love, is the first breath of eternal life that will have no end.

During life we are called to exercise this act of love at each instant, as Br. Charles of Jesus writes. Then all the moments of life, so multiple and dispersed, often so distracted and petty, become as it were gathered and unified in the love of Jesus for the Father, which the Holy Spirit communicates to us, filling us with hope in eternal life that already begins in us and for all.

¹ « Mon Père, je remets mon esprit entre Vos mains »... « C’est la dernière prière de notre Maître, de notre Bien aimé... Puisse-t-elle être la nôtre ... Et qu’elle soit non seulement celle de notre dernier instant, mais celle de tous nos instants »