

2. The Farewell to Beauty

Psalm 41 is a song of joy and sorrow, because it is a song of desire. In desire there is always a mixture of joy and sorrow, of happiness and sadness, sometimes intermittent, sometimes fused in a strange coincidence of opposites, as the Christian mystics often testify. Because the soul's desire is to meet with the presence and absence of fulfillment, of the end of our heart.

When we have any experience of true beauty, whether of creation, of nature, or of culture, as in art, music, poetry, a nostalgia always takes hold of us, because that which we are experiencing with joy, that which is giving us satisfaction, is at the same time saying: "Goodbye!" When we admire a beautiful natural landscape, in the mountains or by the sea, what we are observing is also disappearing. Sure, there will always be new golden dawns and new flaming sunsets, but that dawn there, that sunset there, will exist no longer. It will no longer be the same, and we too will not find ourselves there, we will not have the same feelings, perhaps we will be more distracted or superficial and will not see the beauty with the same intensity.

Every beautiful experience tells us, "Goodbye!", and this is a consolation, because all that passes away, it's like it makes an appointment with us in God's presence, in God. It tells us, "To God! [*adios, adieu, addio*]" In God we discover and will discover all the beauty that passes away, which on this earth we will experience no more as in this precise experience. Especially the experience, most beautiful of all, of friendship, the beauty of friendship, of love of and for another person. Even between husband and wife every experience of love says, "Goodbye!", refers to our life's fullness in God, the fullness of our relationships, of our feelings, which in this life are always threatened with disappearing, with being corrupted, with ending. The more aware one is of this, the more one enjoys the beauty that passes, the moment of friendship that is lived out now, because this awareness enables one to live everything without wanting to cling to anything, letting things and experiences exist, without always wanting to collect or archive beauty artificially. In fact, Jesus asks us to "store up treasure in heaven" (cf. Mt 6:20), that is, to say "Goodbye!" with serenity to every experience, to every instant of life, to every moment of beauty, to every experience of love, of affection, of brotherhood, precisely to be able to conserve all this forever. Virginal possession of things and of people is possible exactly by living out completely the dimension of "Goodbye!".

And Jesus emphasizes that by doing this we too will rediscover our heart: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Mt 6:19-21).

Our heart also needs to say "Goodbye!" to everyone and everything if it wants to find itself eternally in God. When we do not say "Goodbye!" to that which is outside of us, it is like what is outside of us drags us along with itself in its fading away, its passing. It is rather the opposite that should happen: that, referring all our experiences to the Lord, all our affections, the moments of beauty and truth that we

live, we “store” them all up in heaven, in God, for ourselves and for others, and also for the creation that “groans and suffers” (Rom 8:22) because of its “eager longing for the revealing of the children of God” (Rom 8:19). It is as if our heart had the power to make all time, all creation, all encounters, all persons return to God, in the degree to which it lives everything in the virginity that does not clasp to oneself but refers all to fullness in the communion with God.

Fr. Christian de Chergé, the Prior of the community of Trappist martyrs in Tibhirine, ends his testament, which is already to be considered one of the most intense and significant pages of Christian writing, by saying “*À Dieu*,” “To God / Goodbye”, also the Muslim “friend” who could one day take his life, as in fact happened: “And you too, friend of my last minute, who will not have known what you were doing. Yes, for you too I want this THANKS and this GOOD-BYE foreseen by you. And may it be granted us to find ourselves again, blessed thieves, in paradise, if it please God, our Father, the Father of us both.”¹

The Christian martyr desires that even the final meeting with his “enemy” be able to be transformed into an eternal appointment with the Father in heaven. Jesus first of all said “to God / goodbye” to those who were crucifying him, asking pardon for them from the Father (cf. Lk 23:34), and to the repentant thief he said a “goodbye!” that was a “we’ll see each other shortly in Paradise!” (cf. Lk 23:43).

All that we truly say “Goodbye” to while we live it, we live with true intensity, with true respect, with true love, and we guarantee an eternal possession of it for ourselves, we assure ourselves that we will never lose it, that we will be able to enjoy it eternally. We are called, as Christians and especially as monks, to give to the world, to the whole of humanity, this chaste, poor, obedient, and joyful experience of life, to allow Christ to actualize the salvation of all that is human.

The perception of the awareness of the end, of the goal of all, that is, the thirst for God, directs the moment and this gives fullness to time, to the here and now of our life, and so to all of life. Fr. Christian de Chergé makes even the last moment of his life eternal, and the last meeting with the brother who will kill him, whom he calls “friend of the last minute,” because he is already ready to live that moment by giving it as a gift to God, offering it to God. Stretching out toward the ultimate goal of life gathers the dissipated moments of temporal chronology, and unites them, unites life, makes it whole, “monastic” in the literal sense of the term. For this reason we need moments and times for recollecting the dissipation of life, reordering all. We are not dealing with “making order,” but with abandoning ourselves again to reaching toward the end, toward a thirst for fulfillment, toward the thirst for the living God. Otherwise, if we just make order, no sooner than when we set ourselves back in motion all will be disordered as or worse than before.

¹ « Et toi aussi, l'ami de la dernière minute, qui n'auras pas su ce que tu faisais. Oui, pour toi aussi je le veux ce MERCI, et cet « À-DIEU » en-visagé de toi. Et qu'il nous soit donné de nous retrouver, larrons heureux, en paradis, s'il plaît à Dieu, notre Père à tous deux. »