

Contemplation

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WILLIAM CONGDOM, Crucifix n°8, 1961

Words of Spirituality

by ENZO BIANCHI

In contemplation, the crucified Christ makes his presence visible on the face of the one who prays and perceptible in the testimony

‘Contemplation’ is a classic term in Christian vocabulary. It is also a word that has been abused - we often find it used to indicate a particularly elevated and ‘specialized’ aspect of Christian experience, which is then contrasted with ‘active life’ according to a schema that destroys the fundamental unity and simplicity of Christian experience. In the New Testament the word ‘contemplation,’ *theoría* in Greek, appears only once, in Luke 23:48, with reference to Christ on the cross: “When all the people who had gathered for this spectacle (*theoría*: i.e., the Crucifixion) saw what had happened, they returned home beating their breasts.” The term designates here the “concrete spectacle...of Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified ‘King of the Jews’” (Giuseppe Dossetti), and it is in relation to this permanent and irreducible focal center, Christ crucified, that the authenticity of Christian contemplation should be measured. We find a synonym for *theoría* in the New Testament, *gnōsis*, ‘knowledge,’ or *epīgnosis*, (literally, over-knowledge, i.e., spiritual knowledge): both of these terms appear more frequently than *theoría*. They also refer us to the centrality of the cross of Christ, true wellspring of Christian knowledge (cf. 1 Corinthians 2:2), and therefore of Christian proclamation (1 Corinthians 1:23) and praxis (Mark 8:34).

The cross, then, is at the heart of Christian contemplation. It inspires and regulates the content of faith (“not what I will, but what you will,” Mark 14:36) and the form faith should take in history (“not as I will, but as you will,” Matthew 26:39). Contemplation is by no means reserved for mystics or monastics - it is a reality to which all the baptized are called, because every baptized person has been immersed in life in Christ (Romans 6:1-6) and clothed with Christ (Galatians 3:27), and Christian contemplation-knowledge has no other goal than that of making a Christian’s personal and ecclesial life resemble the life of Christ. In contemplation, the crucified Christ makes his presence visible on the face of the one who prays and perceptible in the testimony of the individual and the entire ecclesial community. A contemplative is not someone who separates him- or herself from others or tries to escape society, but a person who tries to discern in history, in people, in events and in his or her own person the presence of Christ. A contemplative’s gaze searches deeply enough to recognize that the temple of God (the verb ‘to contemplate’ refers us to *templum* and to the art of ‘looking at the contours of the temple’), the dwelling of the Holy Spirit, and the place where Christ lives is within the human being.

The contemplative is an expert in the art of discerning God’s presence, a presence not relegated to sacred places and not limited to the religious, but diffused everywhere. Christian contemplation is an absorbing and outward-reaching activity that is capable of renewing our humanity and recreating the human heart. “Show me your humanity, and I will show you your God,” Theophilus of Antioch said. The perfect icon of God-humanity is the crucified Christ, who can be made known and visible to the world through the limitless compassion for those who suffer, the mercy, and the solidarity of Christians who know that they themselves are sinners. Contemplation of the crucified Christ immediately becomes vision of one’s own sin and awareness that one truly is a sinner, and this leads to repentance and conversion: those who had contemplated Christ on the cross “returned home beating their breasts” (Luke 23:48). As Isaac the Syrian wrote, “One who sees his own sin is greater than one who sees angels.” The goal of Christian contemplation is love, *makrothymía* (patience, endurance), compassion, and the opening outward of the heart. It is an event that does not ‘skip’ the mediation of the church or the sacraments, and it is revealed when conversion becomes visible in a Christian’s personal and community life.

We can go further: Christian contemplation sharpens our critical ability and makes us capable of evaluating history and the world in which we live. Is is not by chance that John, who witnessed the crucifixion (cf. John 19:35-37), has become in Christian tradition the ‘visionary,’ the ‘theologian,’ and the ‘contemplative’ par excellence. It is also significant that he has been credited with the composition of the book of Revelation, a text that is severe and penetrating in its criticism of the totalitarianism of the Roman empire and that evaluates history through God’s eyes, that is, with a spirit immersed in the Gospel. Only profound familiarity with the Gospel can produce a gaze capable of discerning human sin and God’s presence in history. Christian contemplation springs from listening to the Word: it is rooted in the centrality of the Word of God in the believer’s life, and in his or her faith that Scripture is a privileged form of mediation of this Word and of Christ’s presence. It has been said that in Christian faith we “see through our ears” - in other words, it is by listening that we arrive at contemplation. This tells us that Christian contemplation takes place in the context of a relationship in which the initiative belongs to God, who “first loved us” (1 John 4:19), who spoke to us first, and who has revealed in his Son the Word made flesh. This is the Word that is mediated through Scripture and passed from one generation to the next within the Christian community, where it is expressed as love. Radical acceptance of the Word leads to the cross (cf. “The word of the cross” Paul speaks of in 1 Corinthians), and it is in the company of others that we give witness to the Word,

proudly but with gentleness and respect. This is the Word from which Christian contemplation flows.

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