

IN SEARCH OF WHAT PLEASES GOD

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CLARETIAN
MISSIONARIES
SONS OF THE IMMACULATE HEART OF MARY

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Deacons of divine mercy in fidelity to the Holy Spirit

“Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practice and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

Col 3:9-17

(NRSVCE used in all Bible texts)

I

The commitment to discernment in a Church that wants to be Church on the Move

The Christian life is a “journey”, it is “living by the Spirit” (cf. Gal 5:25), as attunement, relationship, imitation and configuration with Christ, in order to participate in his divine sonship. For this reason, “all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God” (Rom 8:14).

1. Only on the road, in the process, do we renew our fidelity

The Gospel of John puts in Jesus' mouth a strange definition - perhaps we have become accustomed to it - of his personal being: "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (Jn 14:6) and the Church, the ecclesial communities, will never meditate on it enough. Let us observe that neither the first nor the last word is "truth", because when what we have taken for truth settles us, when it does not set us on our way, on our departure, or, also, when the much-named truth does not engender life in our life so that we may engender true, good and beautiful life, what is considered to be truth, we can be absolutely sure, does not come from, cannot come from the word of God.

And so, the purpose of all discernment, as we shall see in more detail, is established from the outset: on the path, breaking free from all that is familiar, to beget life - to fight with unshakeable hope against all signs of death (sin) - because we learn to shape our hearts (affective life) according to the Truth of God, according to his will - the foundation of our fidelity.

The Truth of God calls us to set out to engender life (Gen 12:1: Abraham's vocation: "go from your country..."; Ex 6:11-13: the vocation of Moses and Israel; Is 6:9: Isaiah's vocation: "Go and say..."). Because the true traveler, a pilgrim with no fixed abode, no ambition, travels light; what matters most is the landscape, the terrain beneath your feet, the sky above, intimate conversation, the desire for clarity...

Setting out on a journey, an experience of gratuitousness, which scorns destiny and cries out forcefully against the outrages of this world, against the harassment of consumerism, against the poison of possession, against the accumulation of news and memes that hijack our lucidity, against the demand to pretend to be what we are not... Transient marginality is an ideal space to rethink our relationship with the other (ecology), others (ethics/politics/community life), and the Other (spirituality) by freeing ourselves from our intended

or imposed roles. And so, “leaving our land”, I repeat, intended or imposed “land”, we let go of weight, we “sell” (Mt 19:16-22), to find that which truly gives meaning to our lives.

The path is certainly not an end; it is a means that, by opening the possibility of recovering new smells, sounds, perspectives, landscapes, and lost memories, allows the reconfiguration of the heart (affective life): different emotions that, when discerned, can become feelings (motions) that orient our freedom in a new way.

Is this not a magnificent way of approaching the task of discernment, that is to say, of taking one’s own life seriously? A seriousness that refers to effort and honesty, to the passion for clarifying the truth without renouncing joy, because when anguish (discouragement), fear (lack of freedom) and complacency (gentrification: wealth) abound in our heart, our trust, faith, in God has been broken. And when we doubt the loving presence of God in our lives due to a lack of trust, the light of hope that always reveals paths of charity is also extinguished. The theological life fades away.

It is useless to refer to discernment when we do not want to get up and set out on the path to life. We can only escape our laziness, our lethargy, by setting out on the road: *Solvitur ambulando* (everything is solved by walking), said Saint Augustine.

And this is the understanding of discernment that I defend and spread: a cordial (heart) celebration (messianic joy) of true human knowledge (vital intelligence), which through successive joyful efforts (liberations) savors a Truth that cannot be possessed, but can be loved (cordial welcome).

Because discernment dilutes most of our useless tensions, by disrupting our temporal becoming: the passage and the weight of time, chronological time (chrónos), is converted into opportunity (kairós) to decide to live for real. Because discernment cures our arrogance as it allows us to become aware of our vulnerability and thus break our fallacious arrogance.

And, most importantly, our God knows about our fragility and

ignorance; he knows about our achievements and our miseries, and he offers to accompany us on that path, on that pilgrimage. That is why every stretch of the road traveled, or rather, every step, makes sense, even if we do not find apodictic, immutable truths; even if we only glimpse small lights, flickering flames that should not be extinguished (Is 42:3), because if they have been discerned with truth, they will always deal with what matters most: worked uncertainties, the noblest that exist, the true experience of faith. And let us never forget that only God is faithful and that our faithfulness is his faithfulness.

2. The wisdom of the Word of God: in search of “what pleases the Lord”¹

The expression *to euáreston* (“what is pleasing”, “what is agreeable”²), which is strange in secular Greek literature, appears in the New Testament only in the writings of St. Paul (Rom 12:2; 14:18; 2 Cor 5:9; Eph 5:10; Phil 4:18; Col 3:20; Tit 2:9) and in the letter to the Hebrews (12:18; 13:21)³. If we exclude Titus 2:9, which refers to the attitude that slaves should adopt towards their masters, its meaning is always religious. In other words, the expression points to the authentic relationship humans should maintain with God: a

¹ What is proposed can be found and deepened in: Castillo, J.M.: *El discernimiento cristiano. Por una conciencia crítica*. Sígueme, Salamanca, 1984.

² Jesus also uses this way of expressing himself once in Jn 8:29: “And the one who sent me is with me, he has not left me alone; for I always do what is pleasing to him”. And let us remember that Fr. Claret sought to please God, his Father, and he did so from a filial sentiment. Cf. Autobiography, 136, 391. In the section on Purposes and in the section on Spiritual Notes he makes several references to this motive of pleasing God. He wrote a booklet entitled *Ramillete de lo más agradable a Dios y útil al género humano* (Madrid 1858) 32 pp. The specialists will say it, but I think it is a not negligible aspect, which expresses his experience of the filial relationship from a decentering of himself to a clear theocentrism.

³ Cf. for more depth, Therrien, G. *Le discernement dans les écrits pauliniens*, Paris, 1973.

beautiful definition of fidelity.

Well, this expression, as we shall see immediately, appears to be closely linked to the task of discernment: it is its result. Therefore, discernment, we will constantly insist, does not aim to find rules or laws of obligatory compliance to achieve a perfection that places human life at the height of God (the Tower of Babel, and, with it, all the possible towers that try to “build ... a tower with its top in the heavens, and ... make a name for ourselves”, was torn down a long time ago -Genesis 11, 1-9). On the contrary, it is about opening an aesthetic, affective, and, therefore, effective relationship because “it is about love” with our God and Lord to shape the human heart from his Love and to act from that founding experience.

Discernment is not and cannot be a purely human project. However, respect for the dynamics of human psychology is essential - *looking and listening well* is not only a gift for others, but also for ourselves - but, above all, it is a fruit of the Holy Spirit; for this reason, and this reason alone, discernment is always a spiritual path: because the love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

As we know, although we often forget, the Holy Spirit is not a mere assistant for our personal or institutional projects. If this were the case, the Holy Spirit would not have the initiative in human life, the Holy Spirit would be subordinate to human will. It is the Holy Spirit that, “blows where it chooses” (Jn 3:8-21), who directs, who must direct the children of God: “for all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God” (Rom 8:14). Therefore, to speak of discernment, as already hinted at above, is to speak of freedom, or rather, of personal and community processes of liberation, because it is to speak of love.

The question that opens discernment will always aim to know how human beings can and should be faithful to the Spirit without forgetting their condition as children of this earth (psychology) and members of a particular culture and social institution (sociology).

There are two Greek terms that our word “discernment” translates:

- *Diákrisis*, which expresses the idea of separating, making a distinction (cf. Heb 5:14; 1Co 11:29), pointing, above all, to discernment in the moral sense: knowing how to separate good from evil.
- *Dokimádsein* expresses the idea of approving by tasting, of savoring (wisdom), which can be considered the most appropriate term and, therefore, the most repeated in the exercise of discernment. It would be discerning through probation (praxis, not just theory, or, if you like, sensible, experimental intelligence) what is authentic, what is good, and what pleases God. In short, the verb *Dokimádsein* should be considered the technical expression that aims to define the basis of the action of faith clearly. It is a key concept for understanding everyday Christian life, not only for clarifying extraordinary faith experiences.

Let's review the texts. But not without warning that we are trying to penetrate the Word of God. We penetrate it so that it penetrates us: it is the strong sense of the verb “to know” in the Jewish tradition. It is not, therefore, a question of dominating the meaning of the text but of the text dominating us so that our heart, the foundation of our actions, is effectively configured by its content. It is the psychological law of human life and, therefore, of discernment: the affective will always be effective in our life, and we should not forget that the Holy Spirit does not pour ideas of God into our hearts, but rather, His Love.

Romans 12:1-2 vigorously expresses what Christian discernment should be in the life of the believer:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and

acceptable and perfect.

As is well known, this text is of singular importance in the Letter to the Romans. At the beginning of the second part, the exhortative part, Paul aims to offer a clear description of what Christian existence, *authentic worship* (*latreia logiké*, an extremely surprising expression!!!), consists of. Well, *authentic worship* implies:

- *Intransigence in the face of the “world”⁴ and transformation of the “gaze”, “life in the light”, which affects all dimensions of the person.*
- *It is a condition of possibility for appreciating what God wants and what pleases him.*

Let us note that Paul is placing discernment at the center of the human being-God relationship at the essence of Christian life. That is why, at the beginning of the letter, Romans 1:28, he writes that pagans are characterized by an inability to discern, and Romans 2:17-20, that discernment for the Jews was purely theoretical, without practical consequences.

Ephesians 5:8-10, from another point of view, reaches the same conclusion:

- *For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light— for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord.*

“Behave... by discerning”: discernment determines what it means to be ‘children of the light’, or rather, children of the light are defined

⁴ The concept of “world” in St. Paul refers to a triple vital situation that will always demand radical vigilance for the person of faith: a) pagan existence, which did not want to recognize and glorify God (Rom 1:18-32); b) Jewish existence, which seeks salvation in the fulfillment of the law (Rom 2:12-29); c) anti-Christian existence, which lives according to its own appetites: selfishness/narcissism (Rom 8:5-8; Gal 5:16, 24).

by discernment, they are those human beings who proceed according to what pleases the Lord because they have discerned his will.

Philippians 1:8-11 offers an important nuance for the task of Christian discernment:

You well know with what Christian affection I miss you and ask in my prayer that your love may grow more and more in penetration and sensitivity for everything, to discern what is best. In this way you will be sincere, and you will arrive without stumbling at the day of Christ, filled with that fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, for the glory and praise of God.

Paul's wish: that love intensifies and becomes the sign of the Christian life, because only in this way will it be capable of discernment. And its purpose is never the search for one's own perfection, but the glory and praise of God; therefore, the task of discernment will mediate, will act as a bridge between love and praise. To put it perhaps more clearly: love without discernment will offer little glory and praise to God, because it will always be a disoriented love, a love that instead of making us less self-centered makes us focus on our "own will and interest", on ourselves (and often under the excuse of holiness!!!). We thus find ourselves with the most characteristic nature of discernment: it is an experience that, engendered by love, penetration (*epignosis*) and sensitivity (*aísisis*), allows us to discover "the best", God's will for human life.

1 Cor 11:28-29 allows us to take a further step in penetration and sensitivity: the indissoluble relationship between discernment and moral praxis.

Examine (dokimadséto: discern) yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning (diakrínōn) the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves.

It is now a question of knowing how to distinguish (*diakrínōn*) the "body of the Lord". It is a question of celebrating the Lord's Supper as the Lord's Supper and not as something else. And it is, therefore, a question of celebrating according to the ethical demands that

derive from the celebration: a single table, a single family, a single feeling, a single celebration... where any possible division distorts its meaning.

2 Cor 13:5-6 warns that the object of discernment refers to the daily life of the believer, that is, to the presence of Christ in each one and in the life of the community:

Examine yourselves⁵ (ἐαυτοὺς dokimásete: discern yourselves) to see whether you are living in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless, indeed, you fail to meet the test! ⁶I hope you will find out that we have not failed.

Paul's authority as an apostle of Christ has been called into question. Paul demands that the community examine their status as Christians. And the object of discernment is the presence of Christ in each one and in the community. Only in this way is fidelity guaranteed, Christian identity: the very being of the Christian person.

Galatians 6: 4-5 will insist on the same theme. In the task of discernment, the authenticity of the Christian existence is at stake.

All must test (dokimadséto: discern) their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbor's work, will become a cause for pride. For all must carry their own loads.

The idea is that each believer discerns and manifests the actions that derive from faithfulness to the teachings of Jesus Christ - a key concept, as is well known in the letter to the Galatians - so as not to fall into the works of the law (Gal 2:16; 3:2,5,10) or of the flesh (selfishness: Gal 5:19). It is, then, specifically about Christian behavior and the key is discernment.

⁵ A new and important expression: *peirásete* (πειράζετε), whose meaning varies according to the context in which it is found, but, in general, it can be translated as "to put to the test" or "to tempt." It refers, then, to the testing of faith and situations in which the believer faces challenges that test his faithfulness. The idea is that these tests are opportunities for believers to demonstrate their loyalty and trust in God, thus strengthening their relationship with Him under the conviction that God will not allow His followers to be tempted beyond their ability to resist and that He Himself will provide if properly listened to (ob-audire), the right path to follow.

However, the practice of discernment in Paul refers not only to this beautiful but also hard spiritual combat that we have been discovering. The Christian community is also called to the task of discernment. In the final exhortation of the first letter to the Thessalonians, 1 Thess 5:19-22, he writes:

Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything (pánta dé dokimásete); hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.

Faced with possible confusion about the action of the Spirit in the community, Paul does not refer to the intervention of experts or authorities but appeals to each person's responsibility, to the sincere search that each must carry out.

But we can go even deeper into the relationship between the path of Christian faithfulness and the action of the Holy Spirit. We now turn to the first letter of John, which sets out, as we know, the criteria that guarantee the authenticity of communion with God and with others. Well, in 1 Jn 4:1, we find these fundamental statements:

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.

The term "inspiration" can refer to a human being moved by a higher principle and to the effects that the human being experiences when moved by some inner feeling. These inspirations can come from the Spirit of truth or the spirit of error (1 Jn 4:6); they can bring human beings closer to or further away from God. Therefore, the letter's author is aware that not all religiosity, not all forms of religion - this is what is essential - is authentic. And the risk is that in the name of religion, of the sacred, human beings can separate themselves from the will of God. That is why all believers, not just a chosen few, must put discernment into practice.

Finally, in Hebrews 5:14, we can read:

But solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties have

been trained by practice to distinguish (prós diakrisin) good from evil.

From 5:11 to 6:12, the letter's author deals with the dispositions that his addressees should have. He reprimands the members of the community because "after all the time you have spent

under my supervision you should be teachers of me, and instead you need someone to teach you the basics of God's oracles" (5:12). In this context he distinguishes two types of people in the community: those who are like children (*népioi*), imperfect or immature; those who are adults (*teleioi*), with a heightened sensitivity to the things of God. It is, therefore, a question of describing those who have reached the maturity of the Christian life. And it is here that the task of discernment appears in all its force as that which distinguishes the mature Christian personality. According to the author, if such a personality does not exist in the community, the community deserves serious reprimand.



CONCLUSION

- *The Spirit of God is not an auxiliary who comes to the aid of human beings to help them fulfill their decisions already made. It is the Spirit of God who pours love into hearts, and “because it is a matter of love”, it is the Spirit of God who sets the pace and the decisions of Christian discernment.*
- *Therefore, because discernment knows how to welcome the action of the Spirit (1 Thess 5:19-22: do not quench the Spirit) in the human heart, the task of discernment is not a marginal issue in the Christian life, but on the contrary, its most proper task, and Christian identity is at stake in its quality.*
- For the true worship that defines Christian existence is concretized and expressed (praxis) in discernment (Rom 12:2). To discern is to walk as children of light to see what pleases the Lord (Eph 5:8-10), to separate the good from the bad because not every religious act is according to God’s will (Heb 5:14; 1Co 13:5-6; 2Co 13:5-6; Gal 6:4-5; 1Jn 4:1) and always to seek paths of love (Phil 1:9-10) because only a heart configured by love, by the Spirit of God, can know and taste with pleasure what pleases God.
- The measure, then, of an authentically Christian life refers to the capacity to discern in each case and in each situation the will of God.
- Verse 10 of Phil 1 offers us, perhaps, the key term that summarizes the whole journey: *diaphéronta* (διαφέροντα) which implies discerning or distinguishing among the available options to choose the best one. Let us read, “that you may approve the best (*diaphéronta*), so that you may be sincere and blameless for the day of Christ.” This term also appears in Rom 2:18, where Paul recognizes that the law of Moses also calls for the pursuit of what is excellent and, therefore, exhorts the Jews to be open to the excellence of God’s will revealed in Christ. This must be our next reflective step.

3. The journey of Jesus: his process of discernment

Before beginning this third step, a double warning is in order:

- *The Synoptic Gospels⁶ and John do not explicitly speak of Christian discernment. And yet, I will try to show how the Christian community, from its intimate penetration into the life of Jesus, wants us to become aware of and savor the experience of discernment that before beginning his public life, his Master lives in the desert, where he was taken, it should not be forgotten, by the Spirit to be put to the test, to be tempted. A radical experience of discernment in the biography of Jesus to discover the true path that God wants for his life.*
- *To properly understand the experience of discernment in the biography of Jesus, a very ancient heresy must be defeated: monophysitism and its companion on the journey, monotheletism. It is about, as is well known, not accepting the consequences of the incarnation, not accepting that Jesus is fully God and fully man (Council of Chalcedon). Sometimes, in the depths of our hearts, we cannot accept; we find it hard to accept that Jesus is human, too human and that all the dynamism of the human body (psychological intimacy) occurs in his biography. The consequence of this lack of acceptance is tremendous: believing that God can only be fully God at the expense of human beings being less human; and, as we shall see, it determines, formulated in favorable terms, one of the clearest rules of Christian discernment: the true acts of human beings either humanize us or they cannot be loved by God. Therefore, being fully human*

⁶ The verb *Dokimádsein* appears twice in Luke's Gospel (12:56 and 14:19), but in both cases, it refers to things that have nothing to do with Christian discernment. The noun *diákrisis* is never used in the Gospels. The verb *diakrinein* is found in Mt 16:3, 21:21, and Mk 11:23, but it does not refer to Christian discernment either.

can be considered the most apparent manifestation of being fully God.

In short, Jesus was like us in everything except sin (Heb 2:18; 4:15); what is more, and the Pauline statement is very strong, “for our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21). In simple words: Jesus lived, fought and died amidst difficulties, tensions, conflicts... and, therefore, even if the Synoptics and John do not explicitly talk to us about it, he had to discern, to search in his daily life for “what pleased God”. And the question arises: What were Jesus’ search criteria? Because the task of discernment aims to follow Jesus, to configure ourselves with Him in the light of the Spirit of God to respond to the will of God the Father.

The Gospels insist that Jesus always acted in harmony with the will of God, the Father in heaven (Mt 6:10; 7:21; 12:50; 26:50; Mk 3:35; Lk 22:42). The will of God was their true nourishment (Jn 4:34). And this radical faithfulness was taken to the extreme (Mt 26:42; Lk 22:42).

They also insist, and have no problem stating, that Jesus’ actions sometimes caused scandal (Mt 11:6; 13:57; 15:12; 26:31; Mk 6:3; 14:27; Lk 7:23; Jn 6:61; 16:1). Jesus’ criterion for action did not simply consist of adapting his life to the established law to present himself as an exemplary, edifying life, approved and plausible for the Jewish society of his time.

But they also maintain that this lack of conformity to the prescribed does not originate in a simple rejection of the law, which is sacred for all Jews. Jesus does not want to repeal it (Mt 5:17-37), but rather to bring it to its full fulfillment: the love that is embodied in piety (hospitality for those who are different) and mercy (forgiveness and blessing).

It has been said above, and we emphasize it: the task of discernment does not refer to the knowledge and acceptance of ethical ideals but to the conclusion of a personal dialogue, a dialogue of

love, with the One we know loves us (affective and, therefore, effective prayer), so that by experiencing love we may be ready to love others, especially those whom nobody loves.

The question that needs answering could be formulated as follows: why was Jesus so free about the religious norms of his time and so demanding, so radical, regarding love, justice, and closeness to the dispossessed? Why did he want to bring the Law to its fulfillment, establishing a radical and novel foundation for human action?

And to answer, we have to refer, as we announced above, to the experience of discernment that the catechesis of the early community invites us to savor: the baptism he receives from the hands of John the Baptist (Mt 3:13-17), where the heavens open; the Spirit comes upon him; and the voice of the Father is heard, assigning to him not only a mission, but a way of carrying it out: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Mk 1:11) which, as is well known, refers to the mission of the Suffering Servant (Is 42:1 ff.), beautifully defined in Is 53:12: "... for he poured out himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors."

That is to say, the voice of the Father not only reveals the identity of the Son but also his mission and the way to carry it out. It not only declares the ultimate meaning, the purpose, of Jesus' life: the salvation of all human beings, but also a way, a style, of carrying out that purpose: solidarity with all the sinners and disinherited of the earth. The good news of Jesus, the Son of God, cannot follow the pattern of honor, splendor, and glory dreamed of by many but has to take on the unusual features of weakness, struggle, and suffering.⁷

⁷ And here we should stop to review Gen 22: the sacrifice of Isaac, where Abraham will be put to the test, even though the angel suspends the sacrifice. Why is the sacrifice of Jesus not suspended?

In short, the Father in Heaven indicates an end to be achieved and a way to achieve that end. That way, it appears to be as important as the end.

A new criterion of discernment is configured as a strong warning to clarify his task: human beings can be deceived or deceive themselves more easily regarding the means than about the end.

Let us remember that the words of the serpent, original sin, refer to the ultimate desire, the final end of the human heart: to want the very life of God (Genesis 3:1ff) - it does not invite us, therefore, to abandon the end of the creature - but offering a means that separates us from wanting God: to eat from the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil, that is, to want to be god without God. And let us also remember that the Synoptic Gospels establish a profound relationship between the baptism of Jesus and the temptations, which are nothing more than the prolongation of the baptism because it is the same Spirit that has come upon Jesus (Mk 1:10 par) who leads him into the desert (Mk 1:12 par) so that the devil, the evil spirit, may test him. The tempter does not propose that Jesus should separate himself from his purpose, that is to say, from his messianic project of salvation ("if you are the Son of God..."), but instead offers him a different path and, perhaps, for some, more effective than the path indicated to the suffering Servant: to save and liberate through prestige, power, domination, the opposite of humble solidarity with sinners and the disinherited.

And Jesus rejects the temptation and will have to keep rejecting it throughout his journey (Mt 4:10, "Away with you, Satan!"; Mt 16:23, "... You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.") until culminating in the request he offers, with a strong historical foundation - not a catechetical construction - Lk 22:40 par.: "Pray that you may not come into the time of trial"⁸, that is, that you do not abandon the

⁸ The awareness of this request, its content, is so strong that the textual tradition feels the need to soften it and in Jn 12:27 it is transformed into: "my soul is troubled."

path that shows that only love saves: unconditional surrender, death on the cross among sinners and evildoers, giving up your life so that others may have life (Jn 10:10), humble solidarity without limits.

4. The practice of personal and communal discernment in everyday life: its rules

4.a. A preliminary warning

I am not going to refer to discernment in situations of extraordinary decisions for two reasons:

- *Because discernment is a task to be carried out in everyday life. Without this daily fidelity, discernment in extraordinary situations is almost impossible. The affective sensitivity to savor the voice of God is lacking.*
- *Because the task of discernment in extraordinary situations always requires personal accompaniment, which demands establishing rules for the accompanied and, above all, for the companion. We will address this task in the second part of our reflection.*

4.b. The rules of discernment

If the above reflection has been assimilated, it can be concluded that the ultimate purpose of discernment is neither the formulation of nor conformity to theoretical principles of action, but a personal dialogue with the Father made possible by the love that the Spirit has poured into the human heart so that we may follow the path of his Beloved Son.

In short, it is not a human technique for resolving conflicts but a call to mystical experience, spiritual experience (being faithful to the Spirit), and a deep and radical life of prayer (finding God in all things).

And all true dialogue of love is a dialogue in freedom. Discernment is a path of liberation. The freedom of the children of God to fulfill his will is his ultimate end. Following the Spirit is not the privilege of a few; it is the task of every Christian. The Word of God testifies that the task of discernment is where every believer staked his or her identity.

When one reads the texts that speak of discernment, one is struck by their vagueness when setting objectives. They never give precise rules. On the contrary, its breadth is always comforting. But from this breadth, from this width, a tremendous demand is derived. Because the "wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceful, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace" (James 3:17-18), for that reason, this wisdom calls for the maximum dedication of life, which, for a follower of Jesus Christ, is always a Paschal dedication:

Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God's Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. Those who are spiritual discern all things, and they are themselves subject to no one else's scrutiny. "For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ. (1 Cor 2:14-16)

Ultimately, and we move immediately on to the formulation of the rules of discernment, it is about accepting that with the coming of Jesus, the Christ, with his death and resurrection, a radical transformation has taken place in the relationship of human beings with God. This transformation means that external law no longer determines human life, because human beings are children of God, a filiation that, because of this, demands that we, children of the same Father, have relationships of fraternity: "that all may be one, so that the world may believe" (Jn 17:21-23). The Word is clear enough:

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And

because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" (Gal 4:4-6)

From this great wisdom, we are going to formulate the rules of discernment. Christian spirituality has given many formulations of them. It can be said that all schools of spirituality have created their own rules. I will present, with simplicity, the common denominator of all of them, converting them into practical criteria for action.

The principle of the rules is clear: to free us from everything that prevents us from experiencing the action of the Spirit in the human heart: "For freedom Christ set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Gal 5:1). And their formulation would be as follows:

- **Theological rule** - God community of people: decide freely, but always ensure that your action engenders or regenerates the community's life.
- **Christological rule** - Paschal Way: humble solidarity: decide freely, but always ensure that your action brings you closer and closer to the poor and disinherited of the earth so that you can be the voice of the voiceless.
- **Pneumatological rule** - Creativity of the Spirit: it comes and goes...: decide freely but always try to ensure that your actions prevent the routine (fulfillment, ritualism, life without hope) that breaks the creativity of love.
- **Anthropological rule** - the fruits of the Spirit in human life: decide freely but always try to ensure that your actions engender in your life and in the lives of others: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Galatians 5:22).

Applying this is simple: look at a week, a month, a year of your life and ask yourself honestly: have the decisions you have made

that have shaped your life engendered community or have they closed you in on yourself, on your own desires and interests? Have your decisions shaped you as the voice of those who have no voice through your acceptance of the Paschal Mystery, or is your life increasingly distant from them? Have the decisions you have made broken up your routine life? Have they opened in you the light of hope that always opens the creativity of charity, or has the dark routine increasingly taken over your life project? Have your decisions allowed you to experience love, joy, and gentleness... or are you increasingly tense, with less patience, with less capacity for listening and mercy...? And then decide, decide freely, dare to set out on the path of obedience to love.

Let us observe that the task of discernment encompasses all the temporal dimensions of human life: it is about illuminating the past (experiential verification) in order to discover the present situation (accepting in truth, describing with sincerity, evaluating and discerning - separating good from evil) in view of a new future (anticipated with spiritual imagination: where will my decision lead me: community, humble solidarity, creativity, joy?), always seeking what pleases God most or, also, aspiring to fulfill his will ever more faithfully.

4.c. A possible practical way to maintain discernment in everyday life

All spiritual teachers confirm that the gateway to discernment, which must become a spontaneous habit in the life of the believer, is the examination of life. A stop (an action that interrupts our doing), a careful dialogue, which seeks, from a double experience: that of the past (verification) and that of the future (spiritual imagination), to pass from one to the other (free decision: present) provoking a process of personal maturation before God. For this reason, the examination is not about confronting our "ideal self", but about confronting our "real self", here and now, so that the presence of God, which is always affective (consolation and disconsolation: it is not about managing ideas), can illuminate our journey. What are the steps of this examination?

- **Gratitude:** giving thanks to God for the gifts received, above all for the gift of life, because they allow us to continue walking in his presence, accompanied by him. The idea is that the Spirit should be the protagonist of the examination, that he should pour out his grace into our hearts just as they are, just as they are (real self); and in the light of this grace, of this gratuitousness, of this experience of love, we should examine our response of love.
- **Verification (past):** From the light of grace, we begin, in the past, the process of verification. It is not a question of thinking, there will be time for that, but of experiencing our situation affectively:
 - Before God: do I feel close or distant from Him? Am I bored of God? Or when I place myself in his presence and contemplate his “face”, do I feel gratitude? Do I feel joy? Or do I feel shame? Or do I feel fear?
 - Concerning my brothers and sisters: what is my attitude towards them? Kind? Passive? Positive? Is there any particular relationship that has been especially good (to be thankful for) or bitter (to be transformed)?
- **Attention (present):** How do I feel about myself from what I have felt? Angry with myself? Hard on myself? Do I put up with myself, or am I unbearable to myself? Am I happy with myself? And we reviewed the previous three moments: which one was the most intense for me? Where did I feel the most profound emotional response (the sign of God’s call) in the here and now of my life?
- **Expectation (future):** Now, the rational prudence to decide: What would God like me to change? What gradual changes should I undertake? What should I reject? (this is the moment of spiritual imagination and the application of the rules of discernment).

- **Gratitude:** we begin in God and end in Him, asking for His presence and His company along the way.

And our psychology gets used to (spontaneous habit) pleasing God in all things and preparing for discernment in extraordinary situations.

4.d. A possible practical way to discern as a community: spiritual conversation

When community conversation is geared towards deciding, it is necessary that it includes discernment, which requires, as we have seen, a way of listening and speaking that is the fruit of the Spirit of the Lord. In other words, conversation in community will require us to fine-tune our listening to attend to our own spiritual movements (motions), those of others, and those of the community (we will go into this in more depth in the second part of our reflection).

The starting point must always be a welcoming attitude towards others. It is assumed and accepted that everyone is trying to welcome a Word from above, from the Spirit, which will later be embodied in one's own vital expression. Let us recall the words of Ignatius in his Spiritual Exercises, no. 22:

It must be presupposed that every good Christian is more ready to save his neighbor's proposition than to condemn it; and if he cannot save it, let him inquire how he understands it, and if he understands it badly, let him correct him with love, and if that is not enough, let him seek all suitable means so that, understanding it well, he may be saved.

And, above all, our Constitutions, no. 16:

Each and every one of us should continually work together to build community. Our speech should always be humble and charitable. Avoiding whatever might wound friendship, we should refrain from sowing discord, from quarreling among ourselves or grumbling about anything. We should never judge one another, for the Lord is the one who is to judge us, nor should we dare be suspicious of one another. Even when we cannot excuse others' actions, we should excuse their intentions. Let us learn to be generous toward anyone

against whom we may have some cause for grievance.

Without this desire for trust and loyalty, which allows everyone to express themselves freely and frankly, no discernment is possible. But then, it is not a question of abandoning the collaboration of each and every person in building the Community; it is a question of discerning personally and as a community why, what is the cause of not being able to discern as a community. This is a good topic for community discernment.

And the concrete dynamic can be this or something like this:

- *Define clearly what it is that we want to discern in such a way that the topic is clear to all those participating in the conversation. And don't forget that it is not only a question of discerning ends (these are already assumed: to improve our listening to God in order to be able to fulfill his will and proclaim his Good News), but also of discerning the means that lead (rational prudence) more adequately here and now to those ends.*
- *Personal time. It is about affectively experiencing in the inner self the resonances (affectivity) that the formulated topic arouses in the inner self of each participant. The path of discernment begins.*
- *Sharing of the resonances (motions) and possible actions (spiritual imagination) that have arisen. It is now a question of listening actively (not judging, that will come later; first, listening) by being open, letting myself be touched by the other person's words. When we listen in this way, we do not prepare for our intervention, but rather we focus all our attention on the other person, on what they are communicating.*
- *Personal time: what we have heard affects us, it provokes motions in our interiority. And now it is a question of personally elaborating what we have heard. One of the most positive effects of spiritual conversation, of common discernment, is that it moves us and takes us out of our comfort zone. It is attentive lis-*

tening that always opens up the experience of vulnerability. A beautiful example of this vulnerable listening is Jesus' conversation with the Syrophoenician woman (Mk 7:24-37).

- *The proposal of possible paths, we insist means, to advance in fidelity to the will of God, knowing that sometimes a unanimous decision will be reached; other times, we will have to vote; and, on certain occasions, the final decision is in the hands of the one who exercises the service of authority in the community. The important thing is that we have the assurance that we have done everything possible to find the will of God. Grace, that is our faith, will do its work, it will do the rest.*

Let us end with a beautiful text from the Collations of Cassian:

- *And, above all, let us examine with the utmost diligence any thought that slips into our heart, any maxim that suggests itself to us. We must consider whether it is fully consonant with the supreme norm of the Holy Spirit and stands the test of divine fire or... whether it comes from the pedantry and puffiness typical of the philosophy of the century, even if on the outside it is proposed to us with a cloak of piety.⁹*



⁹ Casiano, J. *Colaciones*. Rialp, Madrid, 2019, Vol. I, I, XX, p. 30.

II

Spiritual conversation or dialogue, a pedagogical experience that teaches the human heart to discern

From the first centuries of the Church to the present day, spiritual counsel, also called spiritual direction, guidance and accompaniment, has been practiced. It is an ancient practice that has borne fruit in holiness and evangelizing availability. The Magisterium, the Holy Fathers, the authors of spiritual writings and the norms of ecclesial life speak of the need for this counsel or direction, especially in the formative itinerary and in some circumstances of the Christian life. There are moments in life that require special discernment and fraternal accompaniment. It is the logic of the Christian life. It is necessary to rediscover the great tradition of individual spiritual accompaniment, which has always borne so much precious fruit in the life of the Church. Spiritual direction helps us to distinguish “the spirit of truth and the spirit of error” (1 Jn 4:6) and to “clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph 4:24).¹⁰

¹⁰ Congregation for the Clergy: *The priest, minister of divine mercy, an aid for confessors and spiritual directors*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano, 2011, no. 77.

1. Introduction: a first approach to spiritual dialogue

The wise Tradition of the Church recognizes in *spiritual dialogue* or conversation one of the most effective pedagogical instruments for the human heart to acquire the wisdom necessary to respond to the demands of Christian discernment and, thus, cordially, from the heart, to be able to configure all the dimensions of personal life from “what pleases God”.

For this reason, it is necessary, without haste, with parsimony, with calm, to clearly define the dynamics that make dialogue or spiritual conversation possible. We will begin by briefly qualifying the concept of “dialogue” to later address the profound theological meaning of the concept of “spiritual”, because “the Christian life is a ‘journey’, it is ‘living by the Spirit’ (cfr. Gal 5: 25), seeking harmony, relationship, configuration with Christ, to participate in his divine sonship: “all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God” (Rom 8: 14). The primary purpose of *spiritual dialogue*, therefore, will be to distinguish “the spirit of truth and the spirit of error (1Jn 4:6) and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph 4:24).¹¹

“Dialogue” is neither just ‘chatting’ nor ‘debate/discussion’. “Chatting”, more or less intimate, brings the interpersonal relationship to the fore; it is a matter of talking familiarly with one or more people without explicit concern for the implications that what is communicated may have on personal life. ‘Debate/discussion’ always refers to the logical demands of the search for truth and for objectivity. It, therefore, involves a communication of ideas between the interlocutors, without explicit concern for the psycho-affective dimensions of those participating in the discussion. Well, “dialogue”

¹¹ Congregation for the Clergy: *The priest, minister of divine mercy, an aid for confessors and spiritual directors*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano, 2011, no. 77.

or “conversation”¹² seeks precisely to harmonize the demands of the psychological and the logical, of subjectivity and objectivity, of the person and the truth. In short: there is no dialogue when the interpersonal encounter is reduced to either chat or debate/discussion. We will see later that one of the greatest difficulties in achieving spiritual conversation is precisely to converse with clarity about one’s own life experience, assuming the risk —openness and availability— that a Truth may surprise, laying bare one’s own life and offering an unexpected future.

Allow us to recall, with a long quotation that should not be shortened, the beautiful definition that Paul VI in *Ecclesiam suam* (81-82) offers of human dialogue against the backdrop of the dialogue that God maintains with human beings:

“Dialogue, therefore, is a recognized method of the apostolate. It is a way of making spiritual contact. It should, however, have the following characteristics:

Clarity before all else; the dialogue demands that what is said should be intelligible. We can think of it as a kind of thought transfusion. It is an invitation to the exercise and development of the highest spiritual and mental powers a man possesses. This fact alone would suffice to make such dialogue rank among the greatest manifestations of human activity and culture. In order to satisfy this first requirement, all of us who feel the spur of the apostolate should examine closely the kind of speech we use. Is it easy to understand? Can it be grasped by ordinary people? Is it current idiom?

Our dialogue must be accompanied by that meekness which Christ bade us learn from Himself: “Learn of me, for I am meek and humble of heart.” It would indeed be a disgrace if our dialogue were marked by arrogance, the use of bared words, or offensive bitterness. What gives it its authority is the fact that it affirms the truth,

¹² The etymological resemblance between “converse” (from the Latin *conversare*: prefix *cum*-: together with, in the company of someone; -*versare*: to turn, to turn around) and “convert” (from the Latin *convertere*: prefix -*cum*; -*vertere*: to turn, to turn around) is to be considered.

shares with others the gifts of charity, is itself an example of virtue, avoids peremptory language, and makes no demands. It is peaceful, has no use for extreme methods, is patient under contradiction, and inclines towards generosity.

Confidence is also necessary; confidence not only in the power of one's own words but also in the goodwill of both parties to the dialogue. Hence dialogue promotes intimacy and friendship on both sides. It unites them in a mutual adherence to the Good and thus excludes all self-seeking.

Finally, the prudence of a teacher who is most careful to make allowances for the psychological and moral circumstances of his hearer, particularly if he is a child, unprepared, suspicious or hostile. The person who speaks is always at pains to learn the sensitivities of his audience, and if reason demands it, he adapts himself and the manner of his presentation to the susceptibilities and the degree of intelligence of his hearers. In a dialogue conducted with this kind of foresight, truth is wedded to charity and understanding to love. And that is not all. For it becomes obvious in a dialogue that there are various ways of coming to the light of faith and it is possible to make them all converge on the same goal. However divergent these ways may be, they can often serve to complete each other. They encourage us to think on different lines. They force us to go more deeply into the subject of our investigations and to find better ways of expressing ourselves. It will be a slow process of thought, but it will result in the discovery of elements of truth in the opinion of others and make us want to express our teaching with great fairness. It will be set to our credit that we expound our doctrine in such a way that others can respond to it, if they will, and assimilate it gradually. It will make us wise; it will make us teachers."

And now let's look more deeply at the concept of "spiritual". After the post-conciliar effort to recover the community dynamism of the faith - Church, People of God - almost all of us have come to the conclusion that this dynamism lacks an adequate foundation if it is not accompanied by strong processes of personalization. Based on this conviction, spiritual conversation or dialogue is presented as a great pastoral urgency in the processes of maturation of faith,

both in the personal dimension (spiritual accompaniment or direction - we will discuss the suitability of these titles later) and in the community dimension (the dynamics of the Synod of Synodality). It would be too long and even disproportionate to comment on each and every one of the interventions of the ordinary magisterium on the nature, purpose, recipients and different ways of carrying out the, we repeat, pastoral urgency of spiritual conversation or dialogue. We will be content to mention them in a footnote,¹³ but not without pointing out that all the interventions strongly emphasize the primacy of the Holy Spirit, the centrality of his presence that one must learn to recognize in order to find what truly “pleases God”.

This emphasis, as we shall see, not only frees what is traditionally known as spiritual direction from undue interpretations - above all from the excess of directiveness that, sometimes, and rightly, provokes its rejection -; but it also forces us to define with the utmost rigor the attitudes of the participants in the *spiritual dialogue*, which will always demand, in its radical foundation, an adequate

¹³ We gather those we consider most significant: VATICAN COUNCIL II; *Presbyterorum ordinis*, nn. 6. 9. 11. 18; *Optatam totius*, nn. 3. 5. 8. 19. 22; *Perfectae caritatis*, nn. 14. 18. 24; *Apostolicam acruositatem*, n. 30; CODEX JURIS CANONICI, can. 239, §. 2; can. 240; can. 246, §. 4; can. 719, §. 4; JOHN PAUL II, *Christifideles laici*, nn. 56. 58; SYNOD OF BISHOPS, VIII Ordinary General Assembly, *The Formation of Priests in the Present Situation*, Instrumentum laboris, nn. 48. 49; JOHN PAUL II, *Pastores dabo vobis*, 40c. 50d e f. 66a-d. 81c; CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION, Guidelines on the Preparation of Formators in Seminaries, (Nov. 3, 1993), nn. 44. 61. DICASTERY FOR INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE AND SOCIETIES OF APOSTOLIC LIFE, *The Fraternal Life in Community*, (Feb. 2, 1994), n. 50; CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION, (Feb. 2, 1994), n. 50. 50; CONGREGATION FOR THE CLERGY, *Directory for the Ministry and Life of Priests* (31 January 1994), nn. 54. 76; JOHN PAUL II, *Vita consecrata*, 39b. 44.b. 58d. 64d. 66. 95c. 103; CONGREGATION FOR THE CLERGY, *The Priest, minister of divine mercy, an aid for confessors and spiritual directors* (9 March 2011), n. 64-134; BENEDICT XVI, Pontifical Theological Faculty Teresianum (19 March 2011); FRANCIS, *Lumen fidei*, n.35. *Evangelium gaudium*, nn. 70. 169-173; *Laudato si'*, n. 235; *Amoris laetitia*, nn. 36, 38, 46, 52, 78, 108, 108, 199, 204, 207, 209, 209, 211, 217, 222, 223, 227, 230, 232, 234, 241, 242, 243, 246, 250, 253, 255, 260, 288, 291, 293, 294, 299, 300, 308; *Gaudete et exultate*, n. 110 ; *Christus vivit*, nn. 65-67, 242-247, 291-298. Final document of the Synod on Synodality 2024, 12, 18, 24, 24, 30, 36, 42, 48, 54, 60, 66, 72.

relationship between Word, which refers to objective and universal dimensions of faith, and Spirit, which refers to the personal calls that embody this objectivity in history. Briefly: spiritual conversation or dialogue always requires Word and Spirit, that is, truth and life. A life without truth separates us from God's will; but a truth without life also separates us from God's will. Therefore, neither Word without Spirit nor Spirit without Word. It is important not to forget that orthodoxy (right thinking about faith) has to be embodied in everyday life in an orthopraxis (right acting in faith) and that the mediation that allows this unity will always be orthopathy (right feeling about faith: *Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,...*: Phil 2:5).¹⁴

And we can explain even more the aforementioned fundamental purpose of *spiritual dialogue*: to properly order from the light of the Spirit the affective world - unique, original and unrepeatable: personal life (orthopraxis) - so that there can be, precisely, a personalized unity between orthodoxy and orthopraxis, that is to, "clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph 4:24). For this reason, and we are finishing this first approach, spiritual conversation or

¹⁴ Paul does not use the term "páscho" (pásjo), but the verb phronéō. The former means "to suffer," "to suffer," "to experience," "to be affected in one way or another"; the latter has a wide semantic field: "to have understanding," "to think and feel," "to think," "to have an opinion"; but also "to feel," "to have feelings." Páthos means "everything one experiences or feels", and also "state of soul", "moral disposition" (the variety of feelings we experience, whether pleasure or affliction, love or hate), and also "affection", "passion". For its part, phronēsis means "spirit", "mind", "intelligence", "way of thinking", "reason", "feelings", *especially* high (nobility, courage, etc.); "purpose"; "sanity", "reasonableness". The terms are not entirely synonymous, but they partially share the semantic field. In Paul's text we are dealing with attitudes or feelings that can be cultivated in mutual relationships. I think that, making an exhortation, he cannot say "páschete", which indicates the affection produced in people by an afflictive factor (a blow, an illness, a misfortune), but also the affection caused by a favorable factor (at least there is the expression "eu páschein": "to be happy"). More than affections, it is a matter of dispositions that one adopts and over which one has a certain capacity of modeling or mastery. In short, if "orthopathy" is understood in the broad sense of affection or attitude or disposition or worthy feeling that we can cultivate, the quotation from Phil 2:5 is appropriate.

dialogue can never be reduced to theological instruction (although this may sometimes be necessary) or to moral instruction (although this may also sometimes be necessary).

2. The spiritual dialogue of God with human beings: person/community

We now take a second look at the dynamics required by spiritual conversation or dialogue. Many biblical texts can be offered to show how the pedagogical dialogue of God, which reaches its climax in Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, shapes the spiritual identity - life in the Spirit - of his people. But, in my personal experience, Dt 32:1-12¹⁵ reflects with great clarity this divine initiative of shaping (educating) human beings, because it clearly manifests that delicate balance between rigour and tenderness that every good teacher, every good mentor has to maintain.

Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak; let the earth hear the words of my mouth. May my teaching drop like the rain, my speech condenses like the dew; like gentle rain on grass, like showers on new growth. For I will proclaim the name of the Lord; ascribe greatness to our God! The Rock, his work is perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God, without deceit, just and upright is he; yet his degenerate children have dealt falsely with him, a perverse and crooked generation. Do you thus repay the Lord, O foolish and senseless people? Is not he your father, who created you, who made you and established you? Remember the days of old, consider the years long past; ask your father, and he will inform you; your elders, and they will tell you. When the Most High^[b] apportioned the nations, when he divided humankind, he fixed the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the gods; the Lord's own portion was his people, Jacob his allotted share. He sustained^[d] him in a desert land, in a howling wilderness waste; he shielded him, cared for him, guarded him as the apple of his eye. As an eagle stirs up its nest,

¹⁵ The reflections offered are personal notes taken from a lecture by Cardinal Martini. I am sorry I do not know if they are published.

and hovers over its young; as it spreads its wings, takes them up, and bears them aloft on its pinions, the Lord alone guided him; no foreign god was with him.

The proposed text expresses, first of all, what should be a constant persuasion in the life of faith: God guides his People and, therefore, the greatest concern of the person of faith should be to listen (ob-audire) to this wise, loving, tireless guidance, because only from the experience of this "dialogue" can he discover the divine plan for his history and for History (guide to his destiny).

Now, this dialogue sometimes involves moments of breaking with the past (the parched earth; the roaring solitude of the steppe); it is fulfilled through gestures of attention and love (it envelops, sustains and cares); it involves a profound elevation (it spreads its wings and takes you, and carries you on its plumage); and it demands absolute trust (with it no foreign God).

I am convinced that a correct understanding of the *God who accompanies his people: person/community*, constitutes the true light that reveals the attitudes that should be present in all *spiritual dialogue*: the importance of freedom; the utmost respect that is due to the one being accompanied; the renunciation of all manipulation because only in the sanctuary of the conscience, in the "heart", do definitive decisions take place; constant listening and complete trust in the actions of God who invokes and provokes human freedom (personal autonomy). However, this absolute respect for each individual not only seeks their development and improvement but also serves the community's maturation project.¹⁶ Briefly, the maturity of each individual is only possible in the community's maturity, and the community's fullness presupposes the maturity of its members.

The penultimate reason for this difficult but beautiful dialectic is

¹⁶ In Scripture, community and individual are intimately intertwined. As is well known, it is sometimes not easy to determine whether a text refers to a singular person or to the whole people. Also, many texts addressed to the people can be applied to the history of each person (cf., for example, Hos 2:16ff.: community/person; Ps 50: person/community).

the communal nature of the person: nobody reaches their full potential without an appropriate communal space. The ultimate reason is that every person is called to communion with God the Trinity, God Community; that is to say, to the constitution of a single body where Jesus, the Christ, the Incarnate Word, is all in all (Eph 1:3-23; Col 1:15-20). Our faith confesses that this unbreakable relationship is expressed in the Church: the people liberated by God to live in freedom. And it is in the Eucharist, especially in the Sunday celebration, where the personal and communal call to form a single body with the one body of the Lord (1 Cor 10:17) is expressed in a privileged way, thus becoming historical signs of Trinitarian communion.

Well, the dynamic that involves the invocation and provocation of God to shape one's life from the person/community dialectic opens a clear pedagogical path characterized by:

- **Graduality and progressivity (project):** God's wisdom always starts from the real situation of the person/community being accompanied. Even if the situation is disastrous, God always offers the possibility (pity: acceptance; mercy: a warm response to misery) of continuing on the path. Neither an excessive demand nor a complacent condescension, but an invocation and a provocation to freedom which, if accepted, opens up the possibility of restarting the path of fidelity. Briefly: starting from the real situation of the person/community, God proposes a route, a path that can and, therefore, should be followed.
- **Because of the conflict and energy:** it would be wrong to conceive of the path that God offers as a simple evolutionary process, as a continuous succession of increasingly demanding steps. Sometimes, the path of fidelity demands a fundamental break, that moment we call "conversion" (μετάνοια: change of "mind"), and we must always remember that the most difficult conversion is that of the "good", those who, in order to comply with the "law", forget to seek what "pleases

God" (cf. Mk 10:17-22). One of the fundamental requirements of the art of faithful accompaniment will always be to offer light to clearly distinguish when it is time to break away and when it is time to continue. For this reason, accompaniment will sometimes be characterized by the resistance and rebellion of the accompanied, who will always demand to be signs, real presence, of the infinite patience of God (cf. Ps 88; 105; 106; Neh 9:6-37; Ex 14:11-12; Ex 16:3ff.). But, and sometimes we forget this in our daily practice, it will also require us to be signs, a real presence, of the energetic action of God: neither soft nor complacent, neither resigned nor fatalistic, but committed, decisive, even capable of reprimanding. If accompanying consists of helping each person to find their path, it seems strange that we should not sometimes have to make course corrections on a path that would otherwise be diverted in means and purpose (Cf. Rev 3:19; Heb 12:5-7; Jn 15:1-2). Nowadays, there is a tendency to marginalize this idea: in the best of cases, it is accepted that someone should be gently warned that they may be going astray, leaving them to discover for themselves the disastrous consequences of their actions (we will talk about this later).

- **By opening paths of liberation:** the art of accompanying through *spiritual dialogue* will therefore consist of envisioning projects that clearly present the stages and the means required for the desired end, always remembering that the adult is characterized by: by a profound inner unity, the fruit of the light of truth; by convinced and generous dedication, the result of overcoming all forms of turning in on oneself; by a strength that overcomes multifaceted ideological pressures, cultural and social conditioning, in short, the external pressures that sometimes invite one to renounce ideals of fidelity. God's project is liberating: the discovery of true freedom is essential for the development of both the individual (autonomy) and the communi-

ty (love). The path that God invites us to follow always awakens a taste for authentic freedom: he leads the people out of the land of slavery and into the land of freedom (Exodus). And let us remember that the Gospel of John (Jn 8:31) has Jesus say — words spoken with authority: “*I am ...*” — that only the truth makes us truly free. And that this Truth is the divine plan of salvation: free is the person who knows and accepts that their life is a gift to be grateful for; who accepts God’s will with trust; who recognizes that God loves them and calls them to fulfill themselves in their fullness by conforming themselves to Christ, the perfect man. Those who walk the paths opened up by God’s mercy and thus learn to know, love, serve and praise are free and happy. In short, those who are not dominated by pride, who are not obsessed with their own wealth, with their own desire for perfection and, above all, who experience the responsibility of assuming the fidelity of their brothers and sisters (person/community) as their own are free.

- **Because it is inserted in history:** because God’s invocation and provocation of human freedom “does not fall from above”, that is to say, it does not consist of offering a series of generic pedagogical principles, abstract commandments, instructions proposed in a more or less didactic way. Its accompaniment is extremely concrete, inserted in the history of the person/community, capable of stimulating them (invocation and provocation) in the depths of the heart. It is not just about words. Along with words, there are always “events” (*Dei Verbum*, I, 2), those historical events that, due to their strong presence, “strip away”, forcing the person to rethink the meaning of their life. Words and deeds, sayings and actions, promises and fulfillments, commands and corrections..., in short, true historical presence, because reality made up of living people, of concrete things, of everyday situations, of manifest motivations and demands, of

unavoidable relationships, of hard work, of plural and evolving communities and of the presence of the wise and animating Spirit... will always be the true space where human beings are called to configure their being according to the plan revealed in Jesus, the Christ. To tear people away from reality and to take them ideologically to an unreal world, to a space of only ideas or pathetic feelings, will always be the opposite of God's will. Perhaps, I am convinced, much of the psychological and spiritual fragility of our time is rooted in ways of accompanying (both personal and institutional) that offer unreal, closed, idealistic, sentimental projects (crisis of modernity...) that, in the end, only engender aggressiveness, fatigue, frustration and, above all, hopelessness.

- **Because they have human mediators:** let us emphasize once again that it is God pouring out his Spirit in the human heart who is the main actor in the accompaniment. But this emphasis does not exclude, but rather includes human mediators. Without a continuous awareness of the mystery of the Holy Spirit, it is certainly not possible to understand the profound meaning of *spiritual dialogue*; but without human and very human mediators, the action of the Spirit risks being lost. Now, anyone who does not discern the action of the Spirit in their innermost being, anyone who does not allow themselves to be led by Him (Rom 8:14) will not be able to bear witness to His actions in the human heart. This is the risk of *spiritual dialogue*: imposing one's own ideas, breaking God's call to freedom. Contemplating Jesus, the Christ, accompanying his disciples and the men and women of his time (Mk 9:38-39; Mt 18:21ff; Lk 7:36-50; 10:38-40; 18:18-23; 24:13-35; Jn 13:37-38) will always be the demand that the accompanying mediator will have to continually renew. The demand is strong and can sometimes lead to discouragement and abandonment of this pastoral urgency. But this

discouragement and abandonment will always reveal the forgetfulness, the loss of awareness, that, as we have been emphasizing, the true protagonist is God and his Spirit who motivate the human heart to configuration with Jesus, the Christ. It is about helping to perceive the voice of the Spirit, not about being the Spirit: about opening a space in the human heart so that He and only He can speak freely. It is not a question of supplanting, but of teaching how to look and welcome his presence, his action.



CONCLUSION

- *God accompanies the person/people by invoking and provoking their freedom so that human beings can savor the beauty of the Truth that engenders authentic freedom: “the truth will set you free” (Jn. 8:31).*
- *To accompany for freedom does not mean to please or to appease, to conceal the lie, the discomfort, the lack of fidelity... The courage of truth is necessary, always respecting gradualness.*
- *To accompany for freedom demands, therefore, at times, correction, an intervention that invites to conversion, to contradiction. Not correcting the destructive aggressiveness (selfishness and pride) that impedes the authentic person/community relationship will always mean renouncing the ultimate purpose of conversation or spiritual dialogue.*
- *Correction that is not born of mercy (welcoming the other as he/she is) and mercy (a heart quick to respond to misery), that is, of love, does not accompany, it exasperates. Only paternal/maternal love is the source of wisdom that opens true paths to freedom.*
- *For this reason, the ultimate goal of spiritual dialogue can never be described from purely rational logic (more geometric: clear and distinct ideas), because it is a matter of accompanying life, the process of maturity of the person/community. Now, God does not educate “at random” his educational interventions are neither occasional nor incoherent. His accompaniment is always in the light of the ultimate goal; it is always, therefore, “intentional action”, even if it is not easy to grasp at every moment the meaning of his intervention (this is the need to discern the motions of the Spirit). The same must happen in spiritual dialogue, where planning does not mean making everything fit into a rigid scheme but having a sense of purpose and intermediate goals, and operating with flexibility and balance, to maintain or bring the different moments of life toward their true end (inserted in history): configuration to Jesus, the Christ.*

3. Personal spiritual conversation or dialogue

Having recalled the ethical excellence of human dialogue, having emphasized the leading role of the Spirit of God in *spiritual dialogue*, and having delved into the merciful accompaniment that God offers to the person/community, it is appropriate that we specify what personal *spiritual conversation* consists of, comparing it with other spiritual and dialogical practices, with which it is sometimes confused, running the risk of damaging them all. We will carry out this task in two steps: a) clearly defining what *personal spiritual conversation* or *dialogue* is not, comparing it, as mentioned above, with other spiritual and dialogical practices; b) discussing, as mentioned above, the value of the “names” that have been given to this *dialogue* throughout history. In addition to breaking down these two steps, I hope that false conceptions - in many cases, defense mechanisms - that prevent us from assuming this pastoral urgency will allow us to define what personal *spiritual dialogue* consists of positively.

3.a. What personal spiritual conversation or dialogue is not

- **It cannot be confused with the sacrament of Reconciliation:** the relationship between the companion and the accompanied is totally different from that established between priest and penitent. And this for two reasons:
 - The priest in the Sacrament is “authority”; he judges and acts *in persona Christi* under the sacrament of Holy Orders. The companion is neither authority nor imposes anything: his mission is to create a “space/time” where the action of the Spirit can be experienced in the human heart (both in the companion and the accompanied). Confusing personal *spiritual dialogue* with the sacrament of Reconciliation seriously damages the understanding of both. It exposes *spiritual dialogue* to justified criticism, above all that of “directing” through rules and mandates, often imposing the spirituality of the companion on the accompanied,

without heeding the calls that the Spirit makes in the heart of the accompanied. There should never be a “vow of obedience” to the companion, only to the Spirit. It should not be forgotten that authority is always at the service of the community and that there is no community between the companion and the accompanied.¹⁷

- On the other hand, if there were an identity between the sacrament of Reconciliation and personal *spiritual dialogue*, the companion could not return to the content of the previous encounter. This impossibility denatures the itinerary and the path that all *spiritual dialogue* aims to be. *Spiritual dialogue* does not consist, as the sacrament does, of moments that have full meaning because it requires, precisely, the progressive discovery of the path, the project, that God offers to human life.
- **It cannot be confused with preaching directed at a single person:** *spiritual conversation* or *dialogue* with an individual cannot be framed within the *ministerium Verbi*, but rather, as we have been emphasizing, within the *ministerium Spiritus*. We repeat what has been stated: although at times the dialogue may demand the Truth, not my truth, but the Truth of the Word, the attention of both the companion and the accompanied must be directed towards the motions of the Spirit. He is the only one who carries out the teaching activity: the only teacher. To forget this truth supposes:
 - That the accompanied would be obliged to apply what they assimilate of what is supposedly taught (“configure life from what I should do”), forgetting the responsible assumption

¹⁷ Moreover, in the words of Pope Francis, “spiritual direction is not a clerical charism, it is a baptismal charism. Priests who do spiritual direction have the charism not because they are priests, but because they are lay people, because they are baptized” www.religion digital.org/the-pope-of-the-spring/Dialogue-Pope-seminarians (accessed 20/01/2025).

of their own decision from what the Spirit is putting in their heart;

- That the person being accompanied would be forced into passivity and not taught to personally seek “what pleases God”;
 - That the person accompanying may be more attentive to their right to speak than to their right to listen and to their right to feel, on the assumption that the cordial maturation of the person can be reduced to an intellectual assimilation of principles, ideas, concepts... and forgetting that only right feeling (orthopathy: “having the same feelings that Christ had...”) makes possible the unity between orthodoxy (right thinking) and orthopraxis (right doing). In short, the spiritual itinerary is experiential, not just logical-rational.
- **It cannot be confused with a psychotherapy session:** the guide is not a psychological therapist. Such a vision has sometimes been beneficial - attention to all dimensions of personal life - but it has also sometimes led to a strong reductionism that leads one to believe that all of a person’s problems can be solved through the wisdom that psychology offers. St. Paul would tell us that the person is reduced to the “psychic man” forgetting the “pneumatic man” (1 Cor 2:10); that is to say, we must never forget that the person is endowed with an interiority greater than the interiority revealed by his or her psychic dimension.

On the other hand, and I now refer to certain uncritical positions concerning psychological intervention, we need to recognize, and forgetting it is disastrous, that every presence in personal life is positive or negative for its psychological maturation: there is no such thing as a neutral presence, no matter how much it is affirmed and pretended. Whether we like it or not, whether we are conscious of it or ignore it, there cannot fail to be a positive or negative influence on the intersubjective dialogue. For this

reason, it is a fundamental requirement for the companion to continually review whether their presence (dependence; transference) occupies the wisdom of the Spirit in the heart of the accompanied. In short: the neutrality of acting in the intersubjective dialogue should never be taken for granted, no matter how much we have learned from Roger.

And finally, as has been stated, it is sometimes necessary to intervene with the force of the Truth that purifies and corrects. "Spiritualist" reductionism has undoubtedly done a lot of damage: it is a grave mistake to try to resolve psychological problems, and even, according to some, physical health problems, within a spiritual framework; but 'psychologistic' reductionism is also harmful: trying to face spiritual problems with purely psychological techniques can end up hiding the true will of God. Ultimately, who is primarily responsible for the integrative function of the person: psychology or spirituality? The psychologist or the companion? I believe that neither of the two - if this knowledge is formally considered - but rather the person being accompanied. And it is their story that should mark the way forward. It is, essentially, about applying the wisdom of Chalcedon: the human nature and the divine nature of Jesus, the Christ, neither confused nor separated, but differentiated in the unity of his person, which is divine. Because what is at stake, as we have emphasized above, is that the person achieves the unity and integration of all the dimensions of his being.

3.b. The different "names" given to personal spiritual dialogue

- **Spiritual direction:** this is the most traditional name and the one on which most of the criticism after the Council has been leveled, sometimes uncritically (fashions and fads that are followed without adequate reflection). Well, let's start by reading Cardinal Martini: "(the title of spiritual direction) is ancient, traditional and indicates the line of a path, the straight line to follow. Underlying this term is the idea of Christian life as a path

in which one can also take the wrong direction, in which one must be helped to go in the right direction, not to lose the right path.”¹⁸

The Royal Spanish Academy defines the term “to direct” in two ways: a) To make something straight, to guide something in the right direction towards a specific place or goal. b) To guide, show, or give directions. Let’s underline the terms: to make straight, to guide and to orientate, giving directions towards a goal. Well, if we want to avoid reducing *spiritual dialogue* to small talk, to debate/discussion, to psychological therapy, it is necessary to recognize that Revelation offers objective content, given freely so that the person can shape their subjectivity, straighten their life’s journey towards achieving human and spiritual maturity, which will always involve (remember the rules of discernment) the dedication of one’s life to the construction of the community. For this reason, another of the fundamental tasks of personal *spiritual dialogue* is to guide and direct - not to decide or to command - so that the person accompanied can glimpse in their heart the demands of the Kingdom and translate into their life the possible call of God upon them. It is not, therefore, only a question of solving problems or of intellectual clarification: *dialogue* is necessary when this is necessary, but the demands of discernment cannot be fulfilled (to discern/decide requires consolation and peace). It is a question of guiding the person before the Mystery of God.

However, it cannot be denied that the title “spiritual direction” has negative aspects. First, it is not very evangelical and is not found in Revelation (if objectivity is the issue). Second, it can suggest that the companion has all the prominence, preventing the healthy and mature freedom of the accompanied. And we

¹⁸ Martini, C. M.: La direzione spirituale nella vita e nel ministero del prete. La Cittadella, 1984, p. 22.

repeat, only the Holy Spirit directs and animates the Christian life: deacons of the Spirit, yes; substitutes for his action, no. Thirdly, the terms director and directed can also suggest a relationship of authority and obedience: the director commands, and the directed obeys. It has been said above that this is a pernicious error because all authority is at the service of the common good and supposes a legitimately entrusted mission. And the companion, as well as being able to be freely chosen by the accompanied and being able to be abandoned when considered appropriate, can never forget that their suggestions are rightly considered under the condition that the accompanied freely discern their value and meaning for their own life. Without the exercise of this autonomy, there is no personal *spiritual conversation* or *dialogue*.

De nominibus non est disputandum, as the ancients said. I believe this is wise advice that requires us to refer back to the principles from which we have critically reflected on this first title. Let's review them because, from them, we will immediately critically review the title that has been most successful after the Council: *spiritual accompaniment*.

Without a doubt, anyone who takes the risk of personal *spiritual dialogue* has to learn the value of "passivity"; that is to say, they have to learn to develop the contemplative dimension of Christian life: it is a question of giving primacy to faith, which is a gift received freely (a theological virtue), as the foundation of all action, of all work, of all free response. We repeat: human beings do not reach God; it is God who reaches human beings. This God who freely manifests the divine presence in human history calls us to freedom; God wants us to be free and, therefore, responsible. Any *spiritual dialogue* that invites us to renounce freedom and personal responsibility cannot be willed by the God announced by Jesus, the Christ. Furthermore, in personal *spiritual dialogue*, both the companion and the accompanied are *deacons* of the Holy Spirit, the one and only true director

of the Christian life. It is about the accompanied being able to experience the action of God in the most intimate part of their heart and not the ideas, the will, the desires or the projections of the companion. Therefore, following the testimony of John the Baptist, the companion must decrease - he is only a voice, not the Word - so that the Revelation of God can nestle in the most intimate part of the life of the accompanied. Hope, trust and total surrender are due to God and to Him alone (with Him no foreign God).

- **Spiritual accompaniment:** this is the term most used since the Council, replacing that of "spiritual direction" and, among other intentions, aims to assimilate the most positive aspects that Rogers' theory offers about the helping relationship: 1) the presence of an educational accompaniment free of external pressures and focused on the actual situation of the accompanied; 2) an attitude of respectful listening, acceptance and passive expectation on the part of the companion in the first stages of the relationship; 3) the non-interference of the companion in the final decision, which must be taken by the accompanied person freely and without offloading their responsibility onto the companion; 4) the requirement that the companion renounce all presumption and face the task of accompanying with humility, patience and expecting everything from the accompanied person.

However, I think that it is a clear reductionism in accompaniment to attend only to the anthropological (subjective) dimension of psychology, ignoring the theological (objective) dimension of Revelation. It is about configuring life, as has been affirmed above, from the Word-Spirit tension, that is, from listening to the call that the God of Jesus, the Christ, gives to the human heart through the Spirit. Therefore, if accompaniment means the non-directivity of the companion and a profound attitude of listening (as opposed to the possible meanings that spiritual direction may have taken on), this title is extremely appropriate for personal

spiritual conversation or dialogue. But if accompaniment comes to mean a lack of attention to the action of the Spirit and to revealed Truth, the title should be rejected. And, furthermore, as has been stated, it seems to me tremendously naïve to affirm, without further ado, the possibility of a neutral intersubjective presence. Therefore, if accompaniment invites one not to be conscious and, above all, not to review the influence that the companion has on the accompanied, it must also be rejected. The companion must know how to contemplate (passivity) when God acts in the heart of the accompanied; but he must also know how to act when the companion is not responsibly assuming the call to freedom that God offers to his life. Allow me to recall some advice from one of the best companions that God has given to his Church, St. Ignatius of Loyola: "Speak little and late, listen long and willingly, listening long until those who speak have finished what they want to say... be quiet in order to feel and know the understandings, affections and wills of those who speak in order to better respond or remain silent"¹⁹ (many centuries before the birth of humanistic psychology!!! We have beautiful traditions that we are sometimes unaware of and that others copy without naming them).

- **Other titles present in the tradition: Spiritual Father/Mother, Spiritual Advisor, Spiritual Formator:** We only note their presence in the Tradition of the Church and, without dwelling on them so as not to lengthen our reflection even further, we highlight the richness they contain:
 - They underline with great clarity the need for a presence that helps to mature, that engenders mature lives;
 - They also underline, and until now it has only been implicitly

¹⁹ Ignatius of Loyola: Obras. BAC, Madrid, 2013, pp. 683; 713. Copies of English works can be found on the Jesuit website: Resources - Jesuits

affirmed, the “non-equality”, the “non-symmetry” that characterizes the accompanying-accompanied relationship, referring to a peculiar pedagogical relationship between unequals;

- A pedagogical relationship that can never forget that its foundation is the relationship of love, because both the companion and the accompanied are children of the same Father/Mother who must guide them both: a requirement, then, that love always be the “atmosphere” that characterizes the *conversation* or *spiritual dialogue*. Briefly: the relationship of accompaniment can be seen as a sacrament (effective sign) of the relationship God the Father/Mother wants to have with the human creature. We emphasize: an efficacious sign, not a substitution for the personal relationship that every baptized person is called to have with the only Father/Mother, with the only Counselor, with the only Formator, with the only Lord of human life.

3.c. Towards a possible definition of personal spiritual conversation or dialogue.

Two fundamental lines of thought regarding the nature and objectives of *spiritual dialogue* can be recognized in current spiritual and theological reflection. These are not opposing lines but rather emphases according to one’s own theological sensibility.

The first of these lines places personal *spiritual dialogue*, to establish its possible definition, in the realm of the communication of faith: an aid (not authoritarian intervention) that a person (sacrament/mediation: does not substitute the voice of God) offers through dialogue (neither chat, nor discussion, nor psychological therapy) to open a space for discernment (not only problem-solving) that enables the search for and subsequent embodiment in daily life (not in extraordinary moments) of what pleases God (not the companion). This first definition requires us to accept that personal *spiritual dialogue* is an extremely humble pastoral tool (it is not an end in itself and always refers to the fullness that comes with per-

sonal configuration with Jesus, the Christ); but, at the same time, it is extremely necessary: the Word, sacramental life, the Tradition of the Church, catechetical and homiletic preaching are the presuppositions of all *spiritual dialogue*, but this helps the proclaimed orthodoxy to become historical orthopraxis ordering the sentimental life of the believer (orthopathy: have the same feelings that Christ had...) so that he can listen (ob-audire) and respond with authenticity in history to the personal call of God. From the need for the incarnation of the Christian truth in daily life (life in history) derives, therefore, the importance of personal *spiritual dialogue*: a privileged moment for reading the events of life sapientially in the light of the Word, which must become true "signs of the times" to discern the call of God in personal life.

The emphasis on this last statement opens a second line of thought that enables another framework of definition, the action of the Spirit: the believer (explicitly aware of the theological life) seeks help to mature their response to God's call (overcoming the moral dimension and opening up to a vocational project) requiring a process of discernment (immediate goal) in the light of the Spirit. The companion does not ask, therefore, to find the will of God to face a particular problem; he asks, first and foremost, to learn to recognize the presence of the Spirit in the depths of his heart (capacity to discern) to shape his life according to what pleases God. Briefly: *spiritual dialogue* must teach (pedagogy) how to understand how the Holy Spirit acts in the human heart.

CONCLUSION

Truth without compassion impedes conversion and life.

"Availability to God leads to availability to one's brothers and sisters and to a life understood as a joyful task of solidarity"

(Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, 78)

- *In the past, the danger was always to consider the personal (subjectivity) as synonymous with arbitrariness and the abstract universal (objectivity) as synonymous with truth; therefore, it was easy to fall into legalistic, pharisaical educational projects (exteriority of law and uncritical obedience), which formed people in the constant expectation that an authority would say what should be done, thus annulling agility and creative imagination, preventing concrete analysis of historical reality, repressing the interpretation of experiential dataIn a word, denying the possibility of spiritual discernment.*
- *Today the danger is subjectivism, the obsession with the self, the excessive preoccupation with one's own self-realization, which implies that personal conscience is not defined as the proximate norm of human action, but as the absolute and only norm.*
- *The conversation or personal spiritual dialogue must be situated between these two extremes, and, for this reason, its project of realization must be clearly presented:*
 - *The Christian life is a journey; it involves "living by the Spirit" (cf. Gal 5:25) as a process of attunement, relationship, and configuration with Christ, enabling participation in his divine filiation. For this reason, "all who the Spirit of God leads are sons of God" (Rom 8:14). Counsel or spiritual direction assists in distinguishing "the spirit of truth and the spirit of error" (1Jn 4:6) and enables one to "put on the new man, created according to God in righteousness and true*

holiness” (Eph 4:24). Spiritual direction primarily serves as an aid to discernment on the path to holiness, beyond simply solving problems.

- The goal of spiritual direction is to facilitate discerning the signs of God’s will, often referred to as recognizing the lights and motions of the Holy Spirit.
- This objective is inherent to the journey of faith, hope, and charity—configuring oneself with the criteria, values, and attitudes of Christ—while orienting according to the signs of God’s will in harmony with the charisms received. The faithful receiving this guidance should embrace their own responsibility and take the initiative.
- Throughout the spiritual direction process, it is essential to engage in self-awareness in light of the Gospel and to trust in God, which constitutes an itinerary of personal growth. relationship with Christ, in which humility, trust and self-giving are learned and practiced with Him, according to the new commandment of love.

The last four points are taken from Congregation for the Clergy: *The priest, minister of divine mercy, an aid for confessors and spiritual directors*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano, 2011.

4. The community spiritual conversation or dialogue

4.a. The requirement of attentive listening.

- *The Synod on Synodality has brought spiritual conversation or dialogue to the fore (which the Synod calls conversation in the Spirit). This methodology has surprised and attracted attention because it does not consist of proposing great discourses to an assembly, but rather, after a time of prayer and reflection on a topic to be discussed, three rounds of speaking are opened, separated by a time of meditative silence. Let us briefly recall what was stated in the first part of our reflection.²⁰*
- *First round: each person takes turns to share the fruits of their prayer and reflection. Everyone has, more or less and as far as possible, the same amount of time to speak.*
- *Silence: the idea is to become aware of what was felt during the first round, to organize the feelings experienced and to underline, from this affective order, the points that are considered fundamental.*
- *Second round: the participants, now in no particular order and spontaneously (nobody is obliged to speak), share what they experienced in the silence. This is not a time for debate/discussion, but an opportunity to answer questions such as: how has what I have heard affected me? Is there a common thread in what has been shared? Is there something missing that I was expecting to be said? Has any particular intervention affected me in a particular way? Have I glimpsed some fundamental truth that I consider important to share? Here the action of the Spirit begins to be experienced, opening the possibility of discernment.*

²⁰ Point 4.d. of the first part, pp. 19-21: A possible practical way to discern in community: spiritual conversation.

- *Silence: become aware of what has been felt, organize feelings and underline the points considered fundamental.*
- *Third round: Share what has been experienced, looking for what can unite the participants in truth (intelligence), in common feeling (heart) and in action (will). Divergences that seek convergence in a possible common project (love).*
- *Conclusion: the journey is reviewed, and decisions are made about what has been achieved.*

The important thing is to understand that discussing and arguing gives way to listening (to oneself, to others, and to the Spirit), and, therefore, meditative silence is the vital core of *spiritual conversation* or *dialogue*. Also, in the heart, in the sentimental world (the affective is the effective), we will always find the “matter” that discernment must order and illuminate from the light of the Spirit.

Well, the success of the method is also its risk insofar as *spiritual dialogue* can be perceived only as a participatory method for making decisions (a successful way of conducting our meetings) and not as a call to live the path of faith in community, in the Church. For this reason, the teaching of Pope Francis insists that much of the longed-for transformation of the Church in the third millennium necessarily involves harmonizing with wisdom: “conversation in the Spirit, discernment, and synodality, which consist, above all, in listening.”²¹ Therefore, the International Theological Commission warns: “Although synodal processes and events have a beginning, a development, and a conclusion, synodality specifically describes the historical path of the Church as such, it animates structures, it directs the mission.”²²

Why is this call to walk together based on the quality of our *spir-*

²¹ Cfr. Guerrero, J.A.: *Conversación espiritual, discernimiento y sinodalidad*. Sal Terrae, Santander, 2023, p. 10.

²² International Theological Commission: *Synodality in the life and mission of the Church*, n. 48.

itual conversation or dialogue? What call to personal and ecclesial conversion can be found in this proposal? The best anthropological reflection, and the teaching of Pope Francis, consider that human life today is immersed in “three fractures” that prevent its authenticity: 1) the ecological fracture (relationship with nature); 2) the social fracture (relationship with others); 3) the fracture with oneself (relationship with intimacy). Therefore, by opening inauthentic ways of life, this triple fracture makes an authentic relationship with God impossible. In short, human life has a severe deficit of attention to otherness (the other, the self) and, therefore, a serious inability to pay attention to the transcendent Other. In the words of Byung-Chul Han: “Today, the crisis of religion is fundamentally a crisis of attention.”²³

And the conviction that is gaining ground also expressed in the teachings of Francis, is that it is impossible to face these fractures separately: they are so intimately related that we cannot resolve any of them if we do not pay adequate attention to the other two. Any path to conversion must always involve better dialogue with the natural environment, with others and with oneself. But, in addition, it is emphasized that the urgency to act (good intention) to change the lifestyle characterized by inauthenticity often leads to a lack of attention to the inner world, which, whether we are aware of it or not, shapes that action. It is, therefore, a question of sharpening our attention span, which will always involve welcoming listening and an openness (of mind - orthodoxy -, of heart - orthopathy -, of will - orthopraxis -) to the surprises that such attention can engender. In the words of Pope Francis, it is about our attention and actions being moved by “the social meaning of existence, the fraternal dimension of spirituality, the conviction of the inalienable dignity of each person, and the motivations to love and welcome all.”²⁴

²³ Han, B-C.: *Vida contemplativa*. La Magrana, Barcelona, 2023, p. 124.

²⁴ Pope Francis: *Fratelli Tutti*, n. 86.

For this reason, it seems urgent to create spaces for deep listening, spaces where, with *ascetic rigor* and *mystical wisdom*, we recreate from the depths of our own intimacy our capacity to pay attention to otherness. Listening will always mean breaking down our selfishness, whatever form it takes, and being aware that, sometimes, there is also a lot of selfishness in our “desires” for holiness.

In this beautiful and demanding framework, spiritual conversation or community dialogue must occur because dialogue creates a relationship where one is present. And, therefore, it must always refer to that inner and intimate space where “the fountain that flows and runs, although it is night ... I do not know its origin, for it has none, but I know that it has all origin from it, although it is night... I know well that three in one living water reside, and one derives from the other, although it is night... Here creatures are being called, and they fill themselves with this water, although in darkness, because it is night...” (St. John of the Cross).

4.b. The path of conversion offered by communal spiritual dialogue

Living with attention (to oneself, to the other, to the other, and to the Other) will shape our life because, whether we like it or not, our biography is shaped by the intention of our attention. Wherever we place our attention, there our heart will go, and now it is worth remembering the Gospel of Luke: “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Lk 12:34). And, for that reason, it is a good idea to ask ourselves a question in our lives: when we engage in dialogue, when we encounter the “face” of otherness, where do we pay attention from? What does our attention consist of?²⁵

- *It is easy to recognize that, at first, our attention/listening is shaped by what has been, by what has been lived, by what has*

²⁵ I follow very freely the main ideas of: Lozano, J.M: *La conversación espiritual. En el corazón de la espiritualidad ignaciana*. C.J. Virtual Collection, Barcelona, 2024, pp. 21-31.

been learned, by what has been achieved... by the weight of the past. Our listening is biased by the presence of what has already been achieved. Then, our attention/listening is directed towards confirming what is already known (prejudices). The center of the conversation is always me, and my world is structured according to my own will and interests. And when I am silent, I am not listening, but preparing my monologue: before I start, I know what I will hear and am willing to say.

- *In a second moment, we can bring our argumentative capacity into play. We begin to get involved as topics, arguments, or facts interest us or provide new knowledge. Or, we also confront our positions with those of others, seeking to convince them -or to defeat them with our best arguments: I am my point of view and my arguments... and may the best person win (competition).*
- *But it can happen, thirdly, that we feel a strong call to empathize with the other, to make an emotional connection, and to try to understand from the other's perspective. I begin to establish a relationship where it is possible to (re)know the other's "face". I connect with otherness, I break out of the narrow confines of my ego and the desire for a common search begins to emerge: the ego, without losing its autonomy (desire/decision), finds itself anew in the "we" that is engendered by attention to the other.*
- *Then, in the fourth moment, we open ourselves up to life and to the possible future that common feeling heralds. Neither the self nor the past dominates because we are experiencing in our most intimate intimacy that another way of being present, another way of life, is possible.*

Therefore, *community conversation* or *spiritual dialogue* is not only a method for decision-making but a daily lifestyle that allows us to situate ourselves spontaneously, frequently, and effortlessly

(habitually) in the third and fourth moments. And to do this, we will always have to fight (spiritual struggle) against the “three voices” - maybe right now they are shouting!!! - that is in every “I,” but that is not part of the true “I” created in the image and likeness of God: the voice of judgment, the voice of cynicism, and the voice of fear. The first, the voice of judgment, invites us to evaluate, criticize, and judge from a distance. The second, the voice of cynicism, closes our hearts and blocks empathy, leading us either to skepticism or mistrust (breaking all hope). And, finally, the voice of fear, which rejects “letting ourselves be undressed” (Hosea), that walking in freedom (Exodus), that invitation to sell (wealth: a rich young man) to live facing the Truth and dream of a life lived definitively in the bosom of the Truth (what use is it to you?). To recognize these three voices, these three demons, these three evil spirits in our innermost being, and to fight to silence them, to expel them, asking our Master for the miracle of healing, is part of a life that wants to live in freedom with others and according to God’s will (spiritual combat: conversion).

4.c. The missionary vocation of community spiritual conversation or dialogue

Community spiritual conversation or dialogue certainly requires attention and listening. But it also requires “right speech”, a kind of “attentive speaking,” if you will, to fulfill its final intention: to allow God to speak his Word freely and for the Spirit to embody his call in each heart. Let us remember the warning of Saint Paul in his letter to the Corinthians: *“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ...All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.”* (1 Cor 12:4-11).

Well then, just as we have stated that keeping quiet is not a way of gaining time to prepare what we want to say, speaking cannot

be just an opportunity to pronounce our self-interested messages. It is not a question of asserting ourselves in our own will and interest; it is a question of being true servants of the Word, of our word opening space for the only Word that saves, for the "saying" that only God can say. It is, in short, a question of "attentive speaking" so that the words in the conversation do not dilute either the presence of those who converse or the presence of God who wishes to leave in the hearts of those who converse, through the action of the Spirit, his will so that we may follow Jesus, the Christ. And so, "attentive listening" is a way of embodying in history, according to context, the missionary vocation to which we are called.

But it also requires an intense process of conversion: we will have to choose between wanting to be that "great expert" who thinks they know everything, who thinks they can clarify everything, who thinks they have the right diagnosis and treatment for all problems, or wanting to be the "humble missionary" always ready to be a sacrament, an effective sign of the healing that only God can offer.

For this reason, *spiritual conversation* or *dialogue* will always require humility, because it is a question of seeking, not self-affirmation, but the good of the other according to the will of God. Always remember, as a criterion for discernment in our attention/listening/word, that what makes us grow humanly is reason and relationship (empathy: cordial, from the heart).

We emphasize it once again. When our starting point is that we have already achieved everything (wealth/poverty), that we are always right, and that the weight of our past (prejudices) constitutes our entire identity, we not only aspire to "de-bate" and "convince", but we run the risk of considering that the difficulties along the way are always caused by others (breakdown of the community: ecclesiality) and, above all, we forget that the Spirit of God is present in history, also in our conversations.

We have been emphasizing this strongly and want to end this way: *spiritual conversation* or *dialogue* is a recognition of the ac-

tion of the Spirit in the Spirit. Because what it is about, “it comes and goes and blows where it will”, is the life we live and the life we want to live. Let us converse and, in doing so, learn to improve the quality of our attention, listening, and speaking. In this way, we will be faithful to the desire for a renewal of our beloved Church: synodality, encounter, journey, and Spirit, without forgetting that all this is born of silence, of listening to one’s own interiority and that; therefore, all conversation should bring us back to silence, to that silence that Jesus also frequented because “in the morning, while it was still dark, he got up, and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed” (Mk 1:35).



CONCLUSION

*"Availability to God leads to availability to one's brothers and sisters
and a life understood as a joyful task of solidarity"*

(Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, 78)

- *To speak of conversation or community spiritual dialogue is to underline the need for attentive listening and speaking, for encountering in the word and in the Word under the light of the Spirit and, therefore, of the need to shape our lifestyles from the requirement of conversation-conversion-mission. A way of life according to the truth of the Spirit.*
- *Therefore, because the truth of the Spirit demands discernment, spiritual conversation cannot be reduced to a pedagogical method for organizing meetings or making decisions. It is a matter of obedience to the Spirit, who we do not know where he comes from or where he goes (Jn 3:8). The Spirit moves, inspires, and impels. Still, his presence is only verifiable by his fruits in our lives; we never possess or dominate the Spirit.*
- *Because it is a true "spiritual combat" (conversion), the spiritual conversation will involve consolations and desolations, tensions and conflicts, resistances and weaknesses. It is a matter of listening to the Spirit (ob-audire), who shows us the path of fidelity among our vital ambiguities.*
- *Spiritual conversation, therefore, presupposes a relational spirituality, a recognition that without the other, the other, the others (otherness), it is impossible to find what "pleases God." In relationships, the encounter with otherness demands the presence of the self and is always open to the presence of the other. There is no place for intellectualism (excess of reason), a defense mechanism, at times, precisely to avoid the transforming encounter (also in our relationship with God). It is a matter of*

mobilizing all the dimensions of personal life (including reason) without forgetting, or rather, trying to speak always in the "first person," experientially, narratively, from the abundance of the heart (Lk. 6:49).

- *In the end, it is about the common search for God's will. And it is by walking that the encounters that respond to this search take shape. It is not us who choose whom we meet, but as we walk, we converse and become friends in the Lord with those whom God (Providence) places on our path. The road is a gift, and so are the companions along the way. To seek and find the will of God with the brothers and sisters that God himself offers us as a gift is precisely the way to make the long journey toward freedom. Because every spiritual conversation, if it is a true spiritual conversation, will always be a liberating event.*

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CLARETIAN
MISSIONARIES
SONS OF THE IMMACULATE HEART OF MARY

