

November, 2020

IN SOLIDARITY WITH THE PEOPLE TO ANNOUNCE THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Deuteuronomy (5,22-32)

These are the commandments the Lord proclaimed in a loud voice to your whole assembly there on the mountain from out of the fire, the cloud and the deep darkness; and he added nothing more. Then he wrote them on two stone tablets and gave them to me.

When you heard the voice out of the darkness, while the mountain was ablaze with fire, all the leaders of your tribes and your elders came to me. And you said, “The Lord our God has shown us his glory and his majesty, and we have heard his voice from the fire. Today we have seen that a person can live even if God speaks with them. But now, why should we die? This great fire will consume us, and we will die if we hear the voice of the Lord our God any longer. For what mortal has ever heard the voice of the living God speaking out of fire, as we have, and survived? Go near and listen to all that the Lord our God says. Then tell us whatever the Lord our God tells you. We will listen and obey.”

The Lord heard you when you spoke to me, and the Lord said to me, “I have heard what this people said to you. Everything they said was good. Oh, that their hearts would be inclined to fear me and keep all my commands always, so that it might go well with them and their children forever!

“Go, tell them to return to their tents. But you stay here with me so that I may give you all the commands, decrees and laws you are to teach them to follow in the land I am giving them to possess.” So be careful to do what the Lord your God has commanded you; do not turn aside to the right or to the left. Walk in obedience to all that the Lord your God has commanded you, so that you may live and prosper and prolong your days in the land that you will possess.

From a letter of Padre Pio to Father Benedetto from San Marco in Lamis

My dearest father, I have been feeling much worse with my health for several days now. But what torments me most is the cough and chest pains. The cough is so strong and insistent, at its highest level at night, that my chest is almost close to breaking; and often, out of fear, I repeat the act of contrition.

Spiritual wars have not ceased, on the contrary they have become more severe. In short, Father, the enemy of our health is so angry that he does not leave me a moment of peace, but fights me in various ways. I desire from Jesus the grace of being freed from it for fear that I might offend Him, and I wish that, if He wanted to mortify me, He would mortify me with bodily sorrows. That I would accept with a good heart.

Never mind.... I am suffering, it is true, but I enjoy it very much, as you have kindly assured to me that this is not a sign of the abandonment of God, but rather the exquisiteness of his very fine love. I hope that the Lord will accept my sufferings in satisfaction of the innumerable sorrows which I have caused him. Finally, what is what I suffer in comparison to what I have deserved for my sins?

But be it as it may, for me it is enough to know that God wants all this, and I am happy anyway. And now, my dear Father, I would like to ask for your permission about something. For some time I have felt the need to offer myself to the Lord as a victim for poor sinners and for the souls in Purgatory. This desire has been growing stronger and stronger in my heart, so much so that now it has become, I would say, a strong passion. I have in fact made this offering to the Lord several times, beseeching Him to pour out upon me the punishments prepared for sinners and for the souls in a state of purgation, even a hundredfold on me, as long as He converts and saves sinners and soon admits the souls in purgatory to heaven, but I should now like to make this offering to the Lord with obedience to you. It seems to me that Jesus really wants this. I am sure you will have no difficulty in granting me this permission

Bless me, O Father, and pray for me.

Yours, brother Pio

## CATECHESIS

One question: What does it mean to be a missionary in this society that does not seemingly want to belong to God? Announcing the Gospel and inviting to conversion are expressions that return often and we are all convinced of their importance. Unfortunately, we see on a daily basis that the task is not easy and within everyone's reach, because we are faced with a secularised society that has ideals and ethical principles that are not in harmony with the values found in the Gospel. On top of this we must add that very often there is a desire for God in people's hearts, but the idea of an organised and structured religion such as Christianity, with its history rich in merit but also marked by so much humanity, appears more like an obstacle rather than an aid towards faith.

### Intercessors like Moses

We shall try to answer these questions starting from one of the best known figures of the Old Testament and of the whole Bible: Moses. As we know, there are two books in the Scriptures which are particularly focused on his figure, the book of Exodus, in which Moses is the great commander, and the book of Deuteronomy, where - through five great speeches - he is presented as the prophet, the one who becomes the defender of the Alliance with God.

If in the Exodus Moses is in some way "the tongue" of God, in Deuteronomy he is the middle character between the Lord, with whom he has a privileged relationship, and that people from whom he receives a real mandate: "Go near and listen to all that the Lord our God says. Then tell us whatever the Lord our God tells you. We will listen and obey". (Dt 5:27)

The Lord welcomes this request and calls Moses to himself: "'Go, tell them to return to their tents. 31 But you stay here with me so that I may give you all the commands, decrees and laws you are to teach them to follow in the land I am giving them to possess.'" (Dt. 5,30).

At the beginning the Lord said to Moses "go to the people", now he asks him "stay here": his whole person, his body, his history become the meeting point of the Alliance stipulated on Mount Sinai. We are now at the point of total involvement, consisting of love, abandonment, suffering and misunderstandings: Moses belongs entirely to God and to the people. God's faithfulness and the lack of perseverance of his companions in the desert will echo in his heart every day, in the same way as today those who believe feel the responsibility for a mission that makes us witnesses of an unloved, indeed rejected Father: "Love is not loved" Saint Francis often repeated.

Many spiritual authors read in the expression of Jesus on the cross "Sito" - "I am thirsty" - a metaphor for the great desire that He has for the salvation of each one of us; the missionary can fully understand this expectation of God, only by uniting himself to Him in fidelity and in the same abandonment of Christ on the cross.

The seraphim with burning coal

We really need a good examination of conscience before we can understand how the modern era's changes have involved us too, who believe we are the good ones, the ones who have to convert others. Probably discovering our weakness could make us repeat the words of Isaiah:

"Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips." Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for." (Cf. Is 6:5-7)

In the Old Testament, Moses is the model of the prophet, who was born in the womb of the people of God, shares its history, feels the weight of his contradictions, but undergoes a transformation through God. He remains there among the people, but the power of the Spirit transforms him because he must bear witness to something important, the effectiveness of a Word that comes from God, his ability to transform the destiny of those who remain faithful to him.

It happens, however, that at the end of his great mission, from the top of Mount Nebo, on this side of the Jordan, Moses looks from afar at the promised land, but he will not be able to enter it: "This is the land for which I have sworn to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob: I will give it to your descendants. I have made you see it with your own eyes, but you will not enter it!". (Dt 34,5)

"O nature, O nature, Why do you not give now what you promised then?" Giacomo Leopardi's lament in the famous poem *A Silvia*, is repeated every time a father or mother ask themselves where they have done wrong, in front of the son who has had a bad experience, or when at the end of a long pastoral work a priest feels lonely, sometimes misunderstood by his parishioners. The real transformation of God often leads to having to detach ourselves from the most beautiful and most important things. It is the story of the grain of wheat that must die to bear fruit.

He carried the sin of many, he interceded for sinners

Why cannot Moses enter the land that God had prepared for his people? The Book of Numbers refers to the episode of Massa and Meriba, when the Lord ordered him to strike the rock with Aaron's rod to make water flow out of it and quench the people's thirst: "... or when the community rebelled at the waters in the Desert of Zin, both of you disobeyed my command to honour me as holy before their eyes" (Nm 27,14). What exactly happened is not said, and some explanations (Moses would have struck the rock twice and similar ones) do not sound entirely convincing; we do not really have a precise answer to this question, if we exclude the deep bond Moses had with his people.

A more precise explanation of this "punishment" of Moses could begin with the prayer he made in favour of his people: "Please forgive their sin, and if not, erase me from your book that you have written" (Ex 32:32). Rabbinic tradition, as Enzo Bianchi tells us, links this option with Is 53:10-12: "Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the Lord makes his life an offering for sin, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand. After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied ; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities. Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.. According to this interpretation, Moses was not allowed to enter the promised land because he chose to be in solidarity with his people, "he was numbered among sinners", "he carried the sin of many", "he interceded for sinners".

As we clearly know, Isaiah's words are read on Good Friday to celebrate the sacrifice of atonement made by Jesus on the cross: He is the Lamb who is sacrificed for the redemption of all of us. In this way Moses becomes the image of Christ's sacrifice, but also the progenitor of a generation that participates in Jesus' passion with the gift of self. We must read in this way the victim offering that Padre Pio makes of himself, as mentioned several times in his Epistolary. We find evidence of this for the first time a few months after his ordination, in November 1910: "And now, my dear Father, I want to ask your permission for something. For some time I have felt the need to offer myself to the Lord as a victim for poor sinners and for the souls in Purgatory. This desire has been growing more and more in my heart, so much so that now it has become, I would say, a strong passion. I have in fact made this offering to the Lord several times, beseeching Him to pour out upon me the punishments prepared for sinners and for the souls in a state of purgation, even a hundredfold on me, as long as He converts and saves sinners and admits the souls in purgatory to heaven soon, but I should now like to make this offering to the Lord with obedience to you. It seems to me that Jesus really wants this. I am sure you will have no difficulty in granting me this permission".

### Missionaries in a society that seems reluctant to belong to God

We can say that we have gathered some elements that can help us answer the initial question: "What does it mean to be a missionary in this society that seems reluctant to belong to God? It would be simplistic to say that it is necessary to offer oneself as a victim like Jesus, following Padre Pio's example. On the contrary, it is precisely to this society of ours which feels our moralistic religion as a weight, wanting to impose its ethical principles, that it becomes really difficult to speak of a God who needs the death of his Son to redeem our sins.

Let us return for one last time to Moses: how, then, can we read God's punishment? It is clear that the holy author, in order to help us understand the gravity of our guilt, is presenting the Lord to us with our own feelings: angry, eager for revenge, ready to punish the people for their sins. In reality, it is difficult for these feelings to dwell in God; it is good, then, to stop our attention to what is called the punishment of the people: "None of you, of those who have been recorded from the age of twenty years and above and have murmured against me, will enter the land I promised to settle you in, except Caleb, son of Jephunneh, and Joshua, son of Nun. (Num. 14, 29). From now on, the people must live by faith, seeking in the silence and the difficulties of the desert the God who loved them and to whom they did not correspond with the same love. We have seen that Moses binds himself to this people, God not only invests him with a mission, but makes him a meeting point between his holiness and the weakness of his people; that relationship of love repaid with infidelity has its consequences precisely in Moses' life . Thus the patriarch accepts to be with his people: he is in solidarity in his search, he knows that he can only see the promised land from afar, but even he will have to trust until the end that God will fulfil that promise; but he will not see it.

The death of Jesus should be read in this way: not a revenge of the Father, but the obedience of Jesus to a project of solidarity with men, in which He freely decides to accept suffering, ambiguity, the injustice of a false trial and even death. In the silence of the cross, just like Moses, Jesus experiences loneliness and abandonment: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? In profound solidarity with the sinner man, he experiences the worst consequence of sin: not a punishment from God, but a separation from Him." Even though he does not know sin, he has made himself as sin...". In the Pentecostal Sermon Saint Peter attributes to Jesus the words of Psalm 107: "You will not let your holy one see corruption". It is the great act of trust that Jesus had in the Father; He was also invested with a mission; He also chose obedience, He became incarnate to be in solidarity with the people, like and much more than Moses. Like Moses on the mountain, he also seems to stop on the cross: he does not see the realisation of the kingdom of God. He had opened his preaching by announcing this kingdom, and Mary in some way had forced his hand: "My hour is not yet come". "Do whatever he tells you". But on the cross everything seems to end.

The Resurrection, on the other hand, only decrees the end of death, that is, of that state of separation and weakness of man towards God: Jesus celebrates the new alliance and definitively establishes his kingdom. We understand the value of this new kingdom in the light of the history of Israel: the people of Israel reach the promised land, a place that - although pleasant and flourishing - belongs to this earth. However the kingdom of Jesus is not of this world (cf. John): it is the heavenly Jerusalem.

The book of Revelation presents the Church to us as the place where the kingdom of God is anticipated in the expectation of its full realization in eternity.

His light is the Lamb, that is Jesus dead and risen, Mary is the most true image. The Blessed Virgin is precisely what helps us to understand the new dimension of the believer who - with Baptism - entered the promised land.

Although the Church is rich in ethical values and has the mission to bring them to this society, her first announcement becomes this: Jesus died and rose again to establish his kingdom.

### Missionary men and women

We can read the episode of the golden calf and the sin of the people in the desert, in analogy with many sins characterising the life of man of all times: I do not see any results, I look for my results by myself; I do not like waiting, I take everything immediately. In this way, after asking Moses to represent them before God, his people reject that journey of faith, research and silence that the patriarch began on the mountain. Surely one cannot reduce sin to a simple lack of faith, there are human, emotional components, and there are misleading circumstances, all of which can lead to clouding one's own sight, a bit like Aaron does, who trusts the people near him more than Moses who is far away on the mountain. Nor can one reduce the missionary commitment of Christians to the condemnation of individual sins. The Kingdom of God must be proclaimed once again: to be bearers of hope in this society that wants to do without God does not mean raising one's voice to condemn it, but making it aware that it needs Christ and the coming of his kingdom: "Brothers and Sisters! Do not be afraid to welcome Christ and accept his power! Help the Pope and all those who wish to serve Christ and with Christ's power to serve the human person and the whole of mankind! Do not be afraid! Open, I say open wide the doors to Christ! To his saving power open the boundaries of States, economic and political systems, that vast fields of culture, civilization and development. Do not be afraid! Christ knows "what is inside man". He alone knows it!" (John Paul II)

A PRAYER TO SAINT PIO BY CARDINAL ANGEL COMASTRI

Padre Pio you have lived in the century of pride and you have been humble.

Padre Pio, next to you no one heard the Voice: and you spoke with God;  
next to you no one saw the Light: and you saw God.

Padre Pio, while we were running in a hurry,  
you remained on your knees and saw the Love of God nailed to a Wood,  
wounded in His hands, feet and heart: forever!

Padre Pio, help us to weep before the Cross, help us to  
believe before Love, help us to feel the Mass as God's weeping,  
help us to seek forgiveness as an embrace of peace,  
help us to be Christians with the wounds that shed the blood of faithful and silent charity:  
like God's wounds!

Amen

