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At the service of the living stones in the Holy Land

Does it make sense to talk about spirituality today?



Credit: Godruma

Among the requests received for the Grand Master's Corner, a Knight recalled an image used in one of the Cardinal's texts: "We are a small boat with two oars; if we only used the oar of spirituality, the boat would turn on itself and be unable to navigate the sea; but when we also use the oar of charity, then it becomes possible to sail the waters." In his letter, the Knight asks to delve deeper into the matter.

In this text the Grand Master addresses the first aspect, spirituality.

An elderly doctor, admittedly not very observant religiously speaking, in conversation with me revealed that he was reading a recently written book on the future of the Church. I was quite surprised, especially when he commented that, in his opinion, if the Church does not recover *spirituality*, it is doomed to disappear. I did not ask him what he meant by spirituality. However, the question is not secondary.

More than a few writers have criticised the Church in recent years for moral issues or for so-called sociological drifts and the loss of the sacred. In truth, the issue is not of today; in the 1980s/90s during John Paul II's pontificate the issue was raised by J. Ratzinger; and more recently, as Pope Emeritus, Benedict XVI, in *L'elogio della coscienza - La verità interroga il cuore* (An out-of-commerce edition of ninety-nine copies, destined for Benedict XVI as a 'filial' homage by Editrice Cantagalli, and which I had the good fortune to receive as a gift with a dedication from the author himself) had written that "in the current crisis of the Church we are witnesses to the importance and strength of our Christian memory", but that "the Christian fact must be continually defended from the threats of a subjectivity oblivious of its own failure and from the pressures of a social and cultural conformism".

In any case, the question of spirituality really is at the heart of the ecclesial dimension today. Biblically, the subject has been alive since the time of God's revelation; to cite a few well-known examples here, we need only recall the Prophet Elijah, who had a long relationship with God and at the highest moment perceived His presence not in the terrifying and grandiose phenomena of nature, but in the whisper of a gentle breeze (cf. 1 Kings 19:12-13); in turn, Moses had the grace to see the Glory of the Almighty enclosed in the hollow of a cliff and covered by the hand of the Lord: "Then," he told him, "I will take My hand away and you shall see My back, but My face shall not be seen" (Ex 33:21-23).

Then St Paul, after his conversion and having encountered the risen Lord, was the first great teacher of Christocentric spirituality; he made the Risen One his reason for living and preaching; he had understood as much the universality of the relationship with Christ destined for all, as the subjectivity, that is, the 'for me', of the relationship; this became the criterion for indicating the high meaning of that friendship that the Lord had extended to him beyond the Twelve.

The history of the Church has known men and women of extraordinary spirituality: from Anthony Abbot, a hermit in the desert of Egypt, to Augustine bishop of Hippo who pointed to Christ as the point of the recapitulation of History; and then again Benedict of Norcia with his centres of spiritual life in monasteries, Francis of Assisi, who followed Christ *sine glossa*, to the letter, Thomas Aquinas, with his *Scala perfectionis*, Teresa of Ávila, John of the Cross, Teresa of Lisieux and Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein), who died in the Auschwitz concentration camp in 1942. The ideal of spiritual friendship with Christ reached its pinnacle - from the Middle Ages to today - in the never obliterated and most popular (after the Gospel) booklet, the Imitation of Christ. It is said that when John Paul I was found dead in his bed, he had beside him, on his bedside table, the very text of the Imitation of Christ, from which he loved to read a passage every night.

But what is spirituality? By spirituality we mean a relationship, a deep bond of friendship with Christ. It was the Lord himself who described him in a moment of profound truth and affection; Jesus then took his Disciples to him and called them friends: "*You are my friends*"; then he added: "*No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you*" (Jn 15, 14-15).

Friendship with Christ, in the deepest sense, becomes spirituality and is nourished by prayer and good works. The Lord further explained what his bond consisted of; and he did it through a short, very simple, expressive parable; that of the vine and the branches: "*I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing*" (Jn 15, 5). This union is true friendship with Christ and is what we mean by spiritual life.

In turn, it was Jesus' turn to introduce the Father to the knowledge of the Disciples who had asked Him: "*Show us the Father!*" (Jn 14:8). The Church, in the entrustment she will receive from her Master, will be called to make the Father known in the work of the Son, which is consolidated through the grace, accompaniment and consolation of the Holy Spirit. Because of this profound revelation, Jesus included in His friendship all those who, because of the Apostles' preaching, would believe in Him (cf. John 20: 29).

My doctor friend was right. Indeed, if the Church lost its spirituality, it would be reduced to an old socio-educational organisation. Jesus had already said it: You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt becomes tasteless, what good would it be except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men? (cf. Mt 5:13).

Spirituality allows us to escape from the dictatorship of relativism, restoring the dignity of the person and rediscovering the meaning of moral and religious values in our pluralistic society. Just as the

spirit needs a person, a body, to live, so spirituality needs a body to manifest itself: charity. But I will speak about this in another reflection.

Fernando cardinal Filoni

Grand Master

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