

Lectio Divina on Philippians 2:12-18

1. Preparing to listen (statio)

Preparing to listen is making the *transition from hearing to listening*. It is easy to hear the words of Scripture; it is not as easy to listen to the Word that vibrates in its pages. Words can break through and tear through silence; the Word, on the other hand, asks for “*permission*”. It is discreet, like someone who loves us, and only it - paradoxically! - has the key to open the door to our heart from the inside: the *key of the Holy Spirit*- the Same that inspired it and continues to inspire it in believers.

Let us invoke him, therefore, so that the Word we are going to hear may be an encounter with the Risen Lord.

Come Holy Spirit. You are the One who consecrated Jesus with the anointing, sending him to bring the good news to the poor; You are the One who, through baptism, has allowed us to become children of God and living members of the Church; You are the One who, in the sacrament of Confirmation, has given us the courage to proclaim and bear witness ...

Fill us with your presence and your strength, your courage and your grace. Make us understand that God continues to call, today, to the service of evangelization. Help us to participate in this service by living it in communion and solidarity. Amen.

2. Proclamation of the Word: Phil 2:12-18

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure. Do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world. It is by your holding fast to the word of life that I can boast on the day of Christ that I did not run in vain or labour in vain. But even if I am being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and the offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you—and in the same way you also must be glad and rejoice with me.

3. Prayerful reading (lectio)

Let's reread the text personally, even the previous passage - Phil 2: 1-11 - because it is the background that precedes it and underline it, perhaps with a pencil. *Let's underline* the verbs of

action, subjects, nouns, adjectives. We won't race through the text eagerly, but let it *flow* slowly and *persist* in our mind and heart, like waves caressing a shoreline.

Very slowly, the meanings emerge (Paul's feelings and desires, God's action, the lifestyle of the community, the profile and heart of Christ Jesus), even without sophisticated tools of exegesis. We will see, in fact, that "it is not the abundance of knowledge that fills and satisfies the Soul, rather it is the inward tasting and savouring of things" (Ignatius of Loyola).

This quiet reading *is not useless effort*, wasted time: it is the Spirit that turns the lock of our door to let in the great King, the Bridegroom and soul of our community.

Having finished reading the text, let us now read the *parallel texts* since the first key that opens Scripture is Scripture itself (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 112). The gaze widens and deepens; the heart and the mystery of Christ are becoming ever more obvious, close, bright.

4. Meditation (*meditatio*)

The reading that speaks to the heart (*cor ad cor loquitur*) opens to meditation, reflection and questions. In a word: it opens to dialogue with the Lord, animated and looked after by the *Holy Spirit*, *as in the hands of a mother*, as under the wings of a hen.

What does the text say to me? What is the Lord saying to me? Do I recognize him present and active in my life history? In our history? In the history of humanity? What are you suggesting to my community? What inner attitudes do you want? Which ones need correcting? Which ones need even more maturing? What thoughts and desires do you want to live in my heart? What ways of speaking and acting could be looked at? Which brothers and sisters have I/we hurt? Dominated? Rejected?

To foster and facilitate this dialogue with the Word, and to reinvigorate the missionary spirit of our community, an exegetical-spiritual explanation of the text is offered.

"The Word is kneaded with history and transformed with a community"

a. Our cry

We are faced with a Word that is kneaded with history and a history that is transformed and transfigured by the Word. This happens through a small community, capable of loving. Yes, because "men make history, but God makes History" (Father Oreste Benzi). We needed it. Now. Faced with a history that in a flash has been overturned in our hands, by an enemy that is so small - Covid-19 - that we cannot even see it with the naked eye. Lost, helpless, angry. And where is God? Yes, let's ask Him too: "God, where are you?" It is the cry of many, many... Everyone!

b. The background of the passage: joy and history

The passage just read and reread begins with "Therefore", so it is the conclusion of a discourse that began much earlier, even at the beginning of the letter. Its theme began at the beginning of chapter 2 (mentioned above, as the background of the passage): the joy of Paul and his

community. “*Make my joy complete*” (2: 2) and concludes: “[...] *I am glad and rejoice with all of you [...] and you also must be glad and rejoice with me*” (2:17-18) (the Greek text always uses the same term – *chara/chairo* to say joy/rejoice).

At the beginning, the Apostle beckons his small community to obey God “*not only in my presence*”. What happened, then, in those few days, between 50 and 51 A.D., when Paul first arrived in Philippi and established the first Church in Europe?

c. *Paul to the Philippians: God upsets and overturns all projects*

Those few but very intense days, are narrated in detail in Acts 16: 6-40. They could be defined as an uninterrupted succession of *setbacks* and *surprises*. Paul, accompanied by Silas and the young Timothy, cannot do what he wants to: He who “arouses will and action” takes him where he does not want to go and, above all, as he never would have thought of, much less, chosen to do.

Twice, in fact, the Spirit blocks “his” way; then, the Spirit makes him hear the cry of those who urgently need the proclamation of the Gospel: “*Come over to Macedonia and help us!*” pleads a Macedonian in a vision (vv. 6-10).

Arriving in Philippi, the first Macedonian city on the European border (cf. v. 12), a Roman colony, he tries to meet the few Jews gathered in prayer on the Sabbath day. But who does he find along the Gangites River? *Not pious Jews intent on reading the Torah, but women*, who perhaps were washing clothes. One of them, Lydia, to whom “*the Lord opened her heart*”, “urged” us to come and stay at her home (vv. 14-15): a wealthy (and rather insistent!) woman, together with her family, thus become the first European Christians, baptized by Paul.

As if the misunderstandings weren't enough, another woman, a young slave girl, a fortune-teller, really irritates him (*very much annoyed*, v. 18); but the blurt cost him dearly: pushed by those who took advantage of her, “*the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison*” (vv.22-23).

Let us ask ourselves: what would Paul and his people have ever thought, if not: “Mission failed!”?

But exactly “*in the innermost cell*” (v.24) *the lowest point to which the dignity of a Roman citizen could fall, the “history of man” ends and the “History of God” begins to manifest itself*: that jailer who should have been a good guard, helps them get out (!), washes their wounds and does not try to save his hide, but asks to save his life and that of his entire family (cf. vv. 30-34); those judges, who were to condemn them, suddenly ordered their release, “*they were frightened and came to apologize to them*” (vv. 35, 38-39).

Well, with two women, a rich persistent one and a slave girl, and through the vile thirst for profit of those who took advantage of it, the Holy Spirit changes the history of Europe: *the word of God made the Roman walls collapse under their feet - unbelievers - of the apostles!*

Here is the first nucleus of the Philippian community: the family of a jailer and a merchant of purple cloth. They are the ones who “*obeyed*” the History of God, together with Paul, who in prison, “*about midnight were praying and singing hymns to God*” (v. 25), but who had also seen all

his plans overturned, his freedom restricted and lapse into narrow and bitter prospects. These are the same sentiments that are harboured in our hearts today in the face of the pandemic.

d. The Philippians: the evangelising Bride

A few years later, this Jew from Tarsus, from another prison, sent this small community, surely now grown in all respects, a letter, known as the “*letter of joy and friendship*”. In it, the rough and fiery Apostle of the Gentiles no longer comes through, but rather, the father; indeed, almost the figure of the bridegroom: “*because I hold you in my heart, [...]. For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus*” (1: 7-8); *my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown*” (4: 1).

He thanks God and prays “*with joy always*” for them, because he feels them “*sharing in the Gospel*” and “*sharing in God’s grace*” that has been granted to him (1: 5; 7), as - we can say - of a *bride*, who he feels beside him, *intimate and faithful, in the mission entrusted to him*.

He wishes to share with her “*the events that have pushed the Gospel forward*”, which is all his joy (1: 18); he recognizes that he will be saved “*through your prayers*” (1:19); and then the cry of his heart, the marrow of his life, the soul of his soul: “*for to me living is Christ*”! (1: 21).

For this reason, he exhorts them to “*stand firm in one spirit*”, to have “*one mind for the faith of the gospel*”, and to be “*in no way intimidated*”, “*having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have*” (1: 27-30).

e. Hymn to the beauty of the Bride

At this point in the letter, Paul’s heart melts, opens up and pours out in a solemn hymn, loving and eager for the beauty of “his” Church-bride, which can shower him and fill him with joy: “*So if there is any encouragement in Christ, we translate with the exegetes - any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind*” (2:1-2).

These are traits of spiritual beauty that Paul ardently desires, but which can be imprinted on the face of this Bride, only if her members know how to renounce the greed of “their own self” (superiority, self-esteem, interests), strip themselves (of their desires and wills), disarm themselves in front of others (of judgments, gossip) and live at the lowest level - such as that physically inhabited by Paul, still in prison because of the Gospel (cf. 1: 3-4).

In a word, “*let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus*”(2: 5), who did not cling to his divine rights, but emptied and humbled himself, becoming obedient to the extreme. An obedience, which was, however, the royal door for entering into his “exaltation” as the Lord of history (cf. 2: 6-11).

f. The beauty of the evangelising Bride

Paul then “urges” the small community to *enter into the “mind” and into “obeying” Christ*, not only as individuals, but also *as a community* (cf. 2: 5, 12). A “mind”, an “obeying” and an

“exalted being” of Christ, which *is not only a past event*, but is still *lived by the Risen One, before the Father, in his ecclesial Body* (and relived and given back in every Eucharist).

By so doing, the first community of Philippi - as this text will say - can be a *fruitful bride*: not only a recipient, but above all “*in communion for evangelization*” and “*sharer in the grace*” granted to the Apostle to proclaim the Gospel. In other words, being a *collaborator in proclaiming* (spiritually and materially, cf. 4: 15-18), ensuring that the Word is “alive”, effective, a bearer of Life in “human history”, that is, introducing them into the “Salvific history of God”; so that they are *trans-figured*, as happened to Paul, Lydia, the jailer and their families. But let's go step by step.

Paul strongly urges his loved ones to enter into the “obedience” and “mind” of Christ, that is, to “*get busy with their salvation, with fear and trembling*”, since it “pushes” to evangelise. Enter with a filial, trusting, but also solicitous fear (cf. 1 *Cor* 2: 3; *Eph* 6: 5), as the stakes are really high! In fact, to the extent that the small community understands its call and responsibility from God, “*it is God who awakens in them the will and the action, according to his benevolent plans*”: he calls them and does it as entering into his universal salvific History, in an interpenetration between human action - the *interior* will and the exterior *action* - and the Trinitarian one. In other words, Paul asks this Church-bride to love to the very end: *docilitas amoris* (docility in love). And he rattles off their needs, which pierce the soul to the living flesh:

- «*Do everything - I mean everything! – without murmuring*»: not as the Israelites “*murmured*” in the desert, against Moses, longing for their bellies to be full (cf. Ex 15: 24; 16: 2; 17: 3) and thus opposing the “benevolent plan” of their liberation and the Work that God was doing for their good and that of all humanity.
- «*Do everything - I mean everything! - without questioning*», that is, without arguing, discussing in vain, insinuating, distrusting, contradicting, doubting, criticizing - all wickedness that comes from the heart of man (cf. *Mt* 15:19).

So, Paul asks the Bride of Christ to “die within” (it is in the heart that lack of submission to God is dissipated!), not to get lost in “so many stories of men”, to let that personal and intra-community sin die that prevents God from fulfilling “His Salvific History”. He asks her “to die within”, like her Spouse (2: 7-8), in order to be pure, bright, beautiful “without spot or wrinkle” (*Eph* 5: 27; 1: 4), shining like a star in the night of the world (cf. *Eph* 5: 8-4; *Mt* 5: 14), that is, among those who oppose the history of God, a “*perverse and crooked generation*” (Cfr. *Dt* 32: 5).

It is with this “theophanic” beauty that the Church-bride evangelises: as a lamp set in a high place, she spreads the “word that gives Life” and thus becomes a fruitful Bride.

Here is Paul’s pride and joy! The joy of the Apostle’s fruitfulness, tireless father and husband (2: 16); a joy for which - he had just written – “dying” could no longer be “a gain” (1:21- 26). Being able to offer to God a faith lived in this way by his community has no price, if not that of his blood, which Paul, already in chains, would gladly pour on this offering, like his Lord, the true and only Spouse, to whom he promised it (cf. *Eph* 5: 25-27; 2 *Cor* 11: 2).

g. *The troublesome question and the answer of “brotherhood”*

Let us now return to the initial question: “God, where are you?” The Word announced to us that Christ is Lord of History and the “*History of God*” is not finished, because “*God wants everyone to be saved*” (cf. 1 Tim 2: 4): it *continues to be fulfilled in the “histories of men”*, which are fighting many battles today, including the insidious attack of the pandemic.

Even the Apostle's cry to his community has not subsided, but continues to echo, to tell - even for us, individuals and small communities – the need to be *docile collaborators in proclaiming, lights of the Word that give Life*. A voice that cries out today: “*All Brothers*”!

Yes, “*everyone*”, writes Pope Francis: *everyone* should seek the good of the other, *everyone* should think according to “*we*”, *everyone* should have a sense of solidarity (as echoed in *Phil 2: 2-4* and in many other passages of the letter), building a “*culture of encounter*” and not of confrontation, of “*care*” and not of waste, of “*gratuitousness*” and not of domination.

Therefore, Paul concludes to his loved ones: «*Rejoice in the Lord, always. Again I will say, Rejoice. The Lord is at hand!* » (*Phil 4: 4-5*).

5. *Prayer (oratio e contemplatio)*

Enlightened by the splendour of the Word, one can now savour the *peace* of heart, which feels like it *abides in God's truth*. Then, *gratitude* opens up to *praise*; but one can also kneel in *repentance* and in the sincere and deep desire for forgiveness from God and neighbour.

Prayer can also be an *invocation*, a request to the Father for the help necessary to live the Word that has been heard or, of *entrusting* a person, a group, a commitment, a work.

Once expressed, the prayer of conversation stops, is silent and opens to *contemplation*, that is, it becomes a *simple gaze* with the Lord Jesus and with the Father, like children, lovers, mothers. It is a very delicate moment, in which God's action prevails over the human effort to understand and speak. More than a “*looking at God*”, it is being “*looked at*” by Him; it is to relish His gaze on our life and on our community.

At this point, the heart “*warms up*”, as it experiences evangelical *joy*, the *taste* of truth, of the goodness of God and of “*being of the Lord*” (Christians, in fact!). One is ready to *welcome the motions, the touches and the lights of the Holy Spirit*, who moves us to live the high standard of Christian life. It is this wholly interior joy, calm and effusive, that drove the great *saints* to perform extraordinary works or ordinary works in an extraordinary way.

We now come to the last step, that of discerning “*what to do*” *for* the Lord, *with* the Lord and *in* the Lord.

6. *Discernment and action (deliberatio e actio)*

On the impulse and in response to the Word listened to, made “*alive*” by the Spirit, the desire, if not the urgency, of a specific action or set of actions, arises in the soul. One senses a

certain clarity and certainty where the Spirit wants to lead: for example, meeting with a person; the correction of certain attitudes, of a way of doing or speaking; the initiative of a good work or renouncing another, etc.

The tension between prayer and action disappears. *Contemplative action* arises, exerted in the light and with the power of the Spirit of Christ.