

## NINTH STRING

### OUR CHARISM FOR THE CHURCH

#### **BIBLICAL COMMENTARY**

##### **From the Gospel according to Matthew (5, 17-26)**

*Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. 9 Therefore, anyone who infringes even one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be considered the least in the kingdom of Heaven; but the person who keeps them and teaches them will be considered great in the kingdom of Heaven.*

*“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire. So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.*

This extract is part of the opening speech of the Sermon on the Mount, the first of the five speeches of Jesus as related by the evangelist Matthew; many commentators see a symmetry with the five discourses of Moses in the book of Deuteronomy. Jesus is the new legislator, in him the new covenant is fulfilled and a new people is founded.

Despite this, Jesus places himself in continuity with the First Testament and with the Mosaic legislation: there is nothing new formally, but our response to Him requires a new fullness and fulfilment. Believing is not observing a law, but becoming one with the Kingdom of God and its logic.

The rejection of an almost commercial religion based on the “do ut des” (a Latin expression meaning “I now give you, so that you will give me back”) is evident: I behave well, so that you my God, will give me a prize! Rather Jesus taught us a kind of religion based on a spirit of universal brotherhood : we can only go to heaven together, sharing in each other's burdens and becoming climbing partners.

Being a sign of reconciliation does not mean to say we need to go for a kind of peace based on compromises nor on a spirit of belonging to specific groups, or simply because that's the fashion. Believers are signs of reconciliation because they need others, because they are aware that their offer at the altar will be empty and meaningless if they do it for their own good only, or if they are in disagreement with other brothers. Padre Pio's great prayer of intercession was not the titanic gesture of someone who wants to obtain something from God by raising their hands, but it is the gesture of Moses who feels one with his people and for the victory of his people he raises his hands towards Heaven. He asks others to support him in his prayer of intercession. Padre Pio thought of the Prayer Groups as those who support and continue to support his mission as "Samaritan of humanity" over time and in history.

#### **SPIRITUALITY**

##### **From a letter from Padre Pio to Father Benedetto (Letters. I)**

*... It can be all be summed up as follows: I am consumed by love for God and love for my neighbour. God is continually fixed on my mind and imprinted in my heart. I never lose sight of him: I am in*

*constant admiration of his beauty, his benevolence, the agitation he causes, his mercies, his vengeance or rather the severity of his justice.*

*You can well understand the sentiments that consume my poor soul, deprived of all sort of freedom, and tied to Him both in spirit and in body.*

*Please believe me, Father, when I tell you that my occasional outbursts are caused precisely by this harsh prison, which we may even define a "blessed prison".*

*How can one see God saddened by evil and not be equally saddened? How can we see God on the point of throwing out his thunderbolts? There is no way to refrain Him from doing so, other than raising our own hand to stop His mighty arm. In the meantime, we turn towards our brothers and use our other hand to convey our twofold message: that they must cast evil aside and move away at once from where they stand, since the Judge's hand is about to come down on them.*

*However you can trust me if I say that at such moments I am by no means shaken or changed in the depths of my soul. I am not in the least altered. I feel nothing except the desire to receive and to want what God wants. In him I always feel at rest, at least internally, while I am sometimes rather uncomfortable externally.*

*What about my brothers? Alas! So often, not to say always, I have to say to God the Judge, with Moses: "Lord, You will either forgive them their sin or else delete me from the book of life".*

*What a hard thing it is to live by the heart! It means that every moment you are living a death that never kills you, or else we could say one is experiencing a living death and a dying life.*

## **The gifts received**

The Psalms are filled with a feeling of profound contemplation of God's actions: he created man out of love, placing him at the centre of creation; he blessed him with a lineage, a land, wealth and longevity. The Psalms recount that the believer's faith is often put to the test, but then justice, liberation, salvation arrive, because the Lord says through the mouth of Isaiah: «Perhaps a woman forgets her child, so as not to be moved by the child of her bowels? Even if these women forget, I will never forget you" (Is 49:15). Even when man walked away from Him, the Lord looked after him, loved him and forgave him: "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall become as white as snow. Though they are crimson red, they shall become like wool" (Is 1:18).

Padre Pio contemplated this great goodness of God who is capable of drawing good from the persecutions we receive and even from the evil we do: «... if you ever happen to suffer for your afflictions, whatever they are, be certain that, if you love God with all your heart, everything will be converted to good. Even if at that moment you cannot understand where this good could come from, be more than ever sure that it will come without a doubt. If God places you up to your eyes in mud and shame, it is only in order to grant you a better sight and make you admirable to the eyes of his angels, an honourable and lovable sight to their eyes". (Letters of Padre Pio). He placed these reflections in a very precise context: the prompt to a prayer that makes us humble witnesses of the grace that God works in us; for this reason he gave the example of David and Magdalene, who receive forgiveness from God's mercy precisely because of their humility.

The first years of his pastoral activity in San Giovanni Rotondo led him to get to know precisely those limits of coming together as a community in prayer, which we then also detect in our groups. Not infrequently he reminded his spiritual daughters about this aspect and it is important that he believed that only through prayer, humble and constant meditation on Christ's Passion and patience guided by the Spirit, can improvements be obtained in view of our personal sanctification and Christian testimony.

To a spiritual daughter he taught a way of praying which united her to her Spouse and then made her stronger and more willing to accept the setbacks she encountered in her own life: «You could not offer anything better to the Lord than what you suffer in time of affliction and, my dear daughter, at present your Beloved is for you a bunch of myrrh. Therefore don't fail to hold it tightly to your breast. My Beloved is mine and I am His. He will always be in my heart". Isaiah calls him a "man of sorrows". Therefore, he loves sufferings and those who bear them» (Letters).

Padre Pio was very down to earth and knew human psychology well, so he realized that - alongside intense prayer - it was necessary to take care of one's memory. One of the devil's favourite tools, in fact, is to make us go back to episodes of the past, to renew feelings of resentment and anger in us. This is why he recommended that Nina Campanile, one of his first spiritual daughters who – as she herself recognized – experienced those little relational problems: «If you want to preserve yourself from guilt and avoid seeing the great spiritual building that God has erected in you fall to the ground, my daughter, then despise what you believe you see because it is the work of the enemy, it is a lie. Don't think about it, but scorn everything in the name of holy obedience. Every step you take towards this dense satanic picture, no matter how slight it may be, it will always ruin you, and you would toil in vain, thinking you were doing something for your soul by descending to the evil insinuations of Satan. It would be the greatest deception for you and your complete downfall» (Letters).

It is above all in the contemplation of Christ's love for us that we can understand the meaning of true humility; Padre Pio always wrote: «Above all, turn your thoughts to the annihilation which the Son of God suffered for love of us. I want the thought of the suffering and humiliations of Jesus to be the constant subject of your meditation. If you practise this, as I am sure you will, in a short time you will experience its good fruits. Such meditation will act as a shield to defend you from impatience when the sweet Jesus will send sufferings and difficulties your way and will place you in a state of desolation or will make you a subject to contradiction» (Letters).

### **The work of grace**

I cannot deny that very often I felt uncomfortable when with a certain complacency I heard about the rigour used by Padre Pio in confession. The media have often made this point their object of curiosity, failing to make people understand the reason for certain attitudes. Meanwhile, it should be noted that Christian morality is ruled by the Church and I have some doubts as to whether Padre Pio's position was different from that of the other priests. However from a pedagogical point of view this is different: we cannot deny that he frequently raised his voice, harshly reproached someone and that on more than one occasion he denied sacramental absolution. Anyone who knew Padre Pio knows very well how much those outbursts did not come natural to him, they were not part of his character, although he was known for his direct and straightforward temperament.

In our strive to understand this rigour, we need to consider, as witnessed by many people, that Padre Pio had a real horror of sin, as he realized that man was closing his heart to the grace of God that worked in him. Let us return, therefore, to the concept already expressed: it was not the sin, however serious it was, that provoked his reaction, rather the indifference or hardness of heart of those who, despite asking for forgiveness, did not feel the need to place the presence of God at the forefront in their lives.

In this sense he was truly the prophet of reconciliation. Man's reconciliation with God was first and foremost for him, and he was ready to pay personally for the price of their salvation by offering himself as a victim for sinners. At the same time he demanded that penitents be aware of the great opportunity that was being offered to them.

It might be useful to clarify that Padre Pio would not inflict any public humiliations to the penitents. He might instead have postponed giving them the absolution to a later moment and this was not to be considered as a condemnation, but rather a chance for them to reflect or get them to stop delaying their repentance. Most times God's Grace had already worked in them. It was as if the two of them had dug a tunnel, on one side there was the Lord and on the other side stood man's remorse. Now there were only two things that could connect the two in the same tunnel, demolishing the last very thin strip of rock that divided them: the reproach and the lack of absolution, these would bring down the hesitations so that mercy could have the upper hand.

### **Missionaries of reconciliation**

Padre Pio held himself responsible before God for each soul entrusted to him. Assunta Di Tommaso once wrote to ask him if she could become one of his spiritual daughters. He replied: «I greatly appreciate the little picture you sent me; you couldn't have given me a better present. I will always keep it present to the

eyes of my mind and I hope that with divine help it will imprint its meaning more clearly in my soul. Dear God! Jesus is placing the lost sheep on his shoulders; this sheep which with great effort, he has just restored to the fold. The same has happened to me with you, as Jesus made me find another little lamb which was about to wander outside its fold. He made me also hear his voice clearly, so that I should take this dear little lamb on my shoulders and take care of it, in order to one day present it at the eternal banquet. I promised Him in the depths of my heart and I hope I will be faithful to this holy promise» (Letters).

In San Giovanni Rotondo, Padre Pio's spiritual sons and daughters become his collaborators in this work of support to his ministry as a confessor. It is often true that people who come from far leave their lives behind, their families, sometimes even their jobs, to settle next to him and, gradually, a sort of invisible monastery of prayer takes shape, dedicated to the conversion of sinners.

When we say we should be people of reconciliation we clearly refer to the sphere of our human relationships, although with reference to the prayer groups there is a particular mission, which we received precisely from Padre Pio, and that is to support through our prayers the priests who carry out their ministry as confessors. The fidelity of the spiritual children and the prayer groups linked to the charisma of Padre Pio can be seen particularly in those days in which - by now in all parishes - there are penitential liturgies going on or simply times set aside for confessions.

It is thus understandable that we should all choose to be part of 'reconciled communities', which through humility and meekness, endeavour to be part of a living church, made up of mutual understanding and help. The excessive personalization of the Groups, the need for hours and functions at one's convenience, the desire for protagonism and the need to bring out one's talents, all these do not always contribute to the growth of a community. Conversely, the ability to perceive the needs of a parish, to accompany the priest's apostolate with prayer and - internally - the desire to forgive each other and to live in that humility which makes us similar to Christ who left everything, to make himself similar to us, he will be able to help us to be Groups of Prayer and reconciliation.

The ninth string is the song of the Church, the procession of those who are blessed because they go to meet the Lamb. In this way, we will celebrate God at the end of our lives; in the same way, we can celebrate God if, through our apostolate, we become missionaries of mercy and reconciliation.

### **RECONCILIATION WORKERS**

One day Father Pellegrino made fun of Br. Constantine, an elderly lay brother who spent his days trudging through the corridors and reciting the rosary. He did so partly because he liked to joke, partly so as to get Padre Pio to react. In fact Padre Pio harshly reproached him saying: «This man attracts the gaze of Our Lady upon himself and the salvation of many souls will take place thanks to his prayers. You might believe that penitents go to confession because their confessor tells them so and, instead, I tell you that they are driven to repentance by these hidden prayers». Padre Pio realized that Father Pellegrino did not really believe what he had just told him, so he added: «I don't speak like that out of stupid humility. It is the truth! How is it possible that men change their heart and brains? Because their confessor is famous? You're just short of wits, if you think so! Some hearts can only be moved in the presence of the Heavenly Mother. And the Heavenly Mother listens to these devoted children of the Church and descends onto earth. We could say that She gains strength precisely by the prayers of these men that you consider useless».

### **CONSTITUTIVE PRINCIPLES OF THE PRAYER GROUPS**

The founding inspirations of the Prayer Groups draw their inspiration from John Paul II's Apostolic Exhortation *Christi fideles laici* (n. 30). They are:

- Vocation of every Christian to holiness  
Life consistent with faith and with the beatitudes. To fully live the sacraments, the liturgy, popular religiosity.
- *Responsibility to confess the Catholic faith*

Comparison with the Word of God, with the documents of the Pope and of the episcopal conferences, of the Director General for the knowledge of the spirituality of Padre Pio.

- *Testimony of communion with the Pope and the Bishops*

Willingness to accept the teachings, provisions and pastoral guidelines that make the Group a "beacon of light" in line with the testimony of St. Francis and St. Pio.

- *Participation in the apostolate of the Church*

Evangelization and active collaboration with the local Church to bring the proclamation of the Gospel.

- *Presence in human society with active charity, in the light of the social doctrine of the Church*

Participation and solidarity to build more just and fraternal conditions in human society. It is appropriate to pay attention to the needs of the Casa Sollievo della Sofferenza given by St. Pio to the Prayer Groups. Furthermore, we must not underestimate the needs of the needy, especially in the parish and in the neighbourhood

*(Regulations for Prayer Groups, Introduction, n. 4)*

### **NOVENA TO THE SACRED HEART OF JESUS**

1. O my Jesus, You have said:

"Truly I say to you, ask and you will receive, seek and you will find,  
knock and it will be opened to you."

I knock, I seek and ask for the grace of...

Our Father, Hail Mary, Glory be to the Father

Sacred Heart of Jesus, I place all my trust in You.

O my Jesus, You have said:

"Truly I say to you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you."

Behold, in your name, I ask the Father for the grace of ...

Our Father, Hail Mary, Glory be to the Father, etc.

Sacred Heart of Jesus, I place all my trust in You.

O my Jesus, you have said:

"Truly I say to you, heaven and earth will pass away but my words will not pass away."

Encouraged by your infallible words

I now ask for the grace of ...

Our Father, Hail Mary, Glory be to the Father, etc.

Sacred Heart of Jesus, I place all my trust in You.

O Sacred Heart of Jesus,

for whom it is impossible not to have compassion on the afflicted,  
have pity on us miserable sinners and grant us the grace which we ask of you,  
through the Sorrowful and Immaculate Heart of Mary,  
your tender Mother and ours.

St. Joseph, foster father of Jesus, pray for us.

The Hail Holy Queen (The Salve Regina)