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1ST EXERCISE

My Shekhinah

From the Gospel according to Luke (2:15-20)

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child,¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

The Word was born in us, it bears its fruit, a miracle takes place similar to that of Christmas. It is Jesus himself who brings this image to us, comparing his Word to the yeast that is put into the dough. Our role-model and that of the whole Church is the Virgin Mary who welcomes the Word of the Angel, welcomes Jesus at Christmas and in silence meditates, keeps these things in her heart.

The first verb "meditated" comes from the Greek verb symballein, which means to bring two parts of a whole closer together. Mary brings the event, the prodigious birth of her Son, closer to the mystery surrounding it, she brings the history of man closer to that of God. The second term 'to keep', on the other hand, refers to the wisdom reading of the Old Testament, according to which it is not enough to listen to a word, but it is also necessary that we should open our hearts, let the word grow in us and then put it into practice.

Mary's willing heart tells us that listening to the Word is not something abstract nor scholastic. Listening to the word requires a new space within us where God can speak and work at the same time.

SPIRITUALITY

From the Writings of the Fathers of the Church

VENERABLE BEDE - *Homilies on the Gospels, I, 6*

“Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart.”

She does not simply listen, but gathers and treasures. The Virgin's heart becomes the place where the divine words are contemplated. The shepherds represent those who proclaim; Mary represents those who meditate. Both are necessary in the Church: action and contemplation. No one can proclaim well unless they have treasured the Word within themselves first.

GREGORY THE GREAT - *Homilies on the Gospels, 8*

The shepherds return, glorifying and praising God for all that they have heard and seen. Consider, brothers and sisters, what they do after seeing: they do not remain where the vision has taken place, but return to their work. In the same way, after contemplating the divine mysteries, we too must return to our daily occupations, but inwardly transformed. They return to their flocks, but they are no longer the same: they carry in their hearts what they have seen. And they glorify God, because whoever truly sees Christ cannot cease to praise Him.

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From a letter by Padre Pio to Raffaelina Cerase

Pietrelcina, Holy Saturday [11th April] 1914, Epist. II, pp. 69-70

You are sad because you do not know how to pray and you complain because you do not possess the gift of holy meditation and the presence of God. On the contrary, I can tell you that the merciful Lord, in spite of all your unworthiness, has given you the gift of His holy love, the gift of charity. For this give glory to the most tender heavenly Father.

What are those continuous laments of your soul, those holy and most delicate desires which frequently seem to make you faint. I mean to say, you desire to belong entirely to Jesus, to please Him in everything? What is that continual desire to see God's kingdom extended, that ceaseless longing to be set free from the bonds of this body in order to fly away to the bosom of the heavenly Father and be transformed in Him?

Tell me, are these impulses not the effect of that charity which Jesus has poured into your heart and which constitutes the happiness of the regions of the blessed? Is it, perhaps, within the power of the wretched mortals like us to express such wishes? Certainly not! The human spirit without the flame of divine love tends to reach the level of the beast. On the other hand, charity, which is the love of God, raises it up so high that it can reach the throne of God Himself.

We begin this journey of listening to the Word of God by sharing Raffaelina Cerase's (Padre Pio's first spiritual daughter) fears of being incapable of meditating and being in the presence of God. Indeed, this is even more evident to us in our society, where all sorts of news, emotions and events follow one another so quickly that we have no time to think, to grasp the beauty of silence, to look into ourselves for personal reflection. The words that Padre Pio writes to his spiritual daughter, however, are an encouragement to us: it is God who has "gifted her with his holy love, with charity"; her meditation will consist first of all in meditating on the supernatural grace that is at work in her.

Padre Pio then described the instruments through which grace works: a holy desire to please the Lord, a yearning for the coming of God's kingdom, a sincere desire to possess him in heaven. His language became more intimate, and at the same time full of enthusiasm: he referred to the flame of divine love and the knowledge that through these feelings, we are elevated to the throne of God.

Apparently it might seem that Padre Pio wanted to introduce us into an ethereal world, in some ways far removed from the way we live our faith today. But was he really out of time, or is it not today's Christians who have remained in the 'row of the beasts' to which he refers to?

Let us try and answer a few questions together.

Defining the meeting place

The horizon of Padre Pio's happiness took shape over the years, ever since the Sacred Heart appeared to him when he was a child, calling Pio to Himself. A further step then took place before his novitiate, which he describes in the vision of the battle against the giant, and again in the silent exile of the years at Pietrelcina, due to his inexplicable illness.

Very slowly, but with great perseverance, as little Francesco became Brother Pio of Pietrelcina and then Padre Pio, his faith, his prayers and his choices, instead of narrowing his aspirations as an adolescent and a young man open to life (which he might seem to be), rather expanded his heart. That body, which would later be marked by the stigmata, became the theatre in which God played his part freely; through prayer he learnt how to understand what it means to be marked by God through baptism; through meditation he saw the image of God represented within himself.

Thus the first question to ask if we want to learn how to meditate arises: how willing are we to look at God's presence within us? There is a difference between the actions or gifts of God, which we can easily

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recognise, and his representation. When we say that we are the image of Christ, we define our body, our emotions, the reactions we have to the events of life, we live in a place where we are not alone, he is there; we could emphasise this to the point of saying that we are guests of Jesus in our own bodies.

The role of the word

Learning how to meditate, therefore, means first of all creating a familiar environment within ourselves; we cannot think of living an abstract meditation, focussing on a subject far away from us. Rather we must let God enter our story, see him and listen to him. In this regard, Padre Pio recommended: 'Participants in Prayer Groups, and in any religious function, should be ready to welcome God's word and inspirations, as St. Francis was at San Damiano. Only if we are able to listen to the Word of God in our environment, feeling that it is among us, in our home, are we able to enjoy the pleasure of talking to Him. The Word encourages us to do good, which is not something abstract nor purely legal (do this or something bad will happen to you). Rather it is the result of our wonder at feeling the Lord who is beside us and is visiting us. In his encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium*, on the proclamation of the Gospel in today's world, Pope Francis, encourages us to look at the Virgin Mary's way of meditating: 'The memory of the faithful people, like that of Mary's own, must remain a glowing reflection of the wonders of God. Mary's heart, open to the hope of a joyful and possible practice of the love that has been proclaimed, feels that every word in the Scriptures is first of all a gift, before being a need'.

The rosary: letting oneself be drawn into God's world

When we celebrate the rosary together, it takes us to a spiritual place that helps us go beyond listening to and meditating on the Word. Together with our brothers and sisters, we can experience God's presence with Mary in our own lives. In the Middle Ages, the image of the hortus conclusus was frequently used to celebrate Mary's prayer with the Christian community. The hortus conclusus probably originated in the monastic field, as an enclosed place within the monastery, where fields and flowers were cultivated.

Several medieval paintings (think of the work of a painter called Maestro from 1456) depict Mary with angels and saints in a pleasant place, full of flowers and herbs surrounded by walls.

Padre Pio recommended that the Rosary should not just be the cold repetition of the Hail Marys, but should be accompanied by the meditation on the mysteries of Redemption.

Thy Kingdom come

Being missionaries of the kingdom of God, means waiting for it together; listening and communal meditation on the Word of God, are already a fulfilment of the coming of the Kingdom of God.

According to Father Marcellino Lasenzaniro, Padre Pio made it clear that his spiritual direction was never an end in itself. "My intention is to form a few souls who in turn are like a seed for other souls, mothers of all souls.

Listening together to the Word does not mean merely drawing teachings or precepts, but contemplating how the Lord Jesus takes shape in the lives of others; the invincible power of God's love triumphing over human poverty is the great possibility that is written in each one of us to transmit this grace by faith and testimony. For Padre Pio, the Prayer Groups are called precisely to contemplate this work of God together, in order to then be able to love the history of others with the same strength and donation with which Jesus loved it.

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7 OCTOBER - FEAST OF THE MADONNA DEL ROSARIO

The ceremony of the handing over of the rosaries

On the seventh of October the social year begins for all the Groups of the world with the handing over of the rosary beads. The Group Centre proposes a small liturgy based on the theme of the year, and the celebration can take place at individual Group level or in every diocese.

Let us practise the meditated recitation of the holy rosary accompanied by moments of silence. Sometimes it is thought that evangelical texts and writings by devout authors are necessary every time, but then no time is given to silence. In the Christian tradition, the enunciation of the mystery is in itself a synthesis of the Gospel passage. We can either leave out the enunciation of the mystery or not read the Gospel and then pause for silence to allow time to think and listen to the Lord.

PRAYER OF JOHN PAUL II TO PADRE PIO

Humble and beloved Padre Pio,
teach us, we pray,
humility of heart,
so that we may be counted
among the little ones of the Gospel,
to whom the Father promised to reveal
the mysteries of His Kingdom.

Help us to pray without ceasing,
certain that God knows what we need
even before we ask Him.

Obtain for us the eyes of faith
that will be able to recognize the face of Jesus
in the poor and the suffering.

Sustain us in the hour of the combat and trial and,
if we fall, make us experience the joy of
the sacrament of forgiveness.

Grant us your tender devotion to Mary,
mother of Jesus and our own Mother.

Accompany us on our earthly pilgrimage
towards the blessed Homeland,
where we hope to arrive
in order to contemplate the Glory of
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit forever.
Amen