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2ND EXERCISE

GOING TO MEET OUR GROOM

From the Gospel according to Matthew, 25, 1-13

“At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.

“At midnight the cry rang out: ‘Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’

“Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.’

“‘No,’ they replied, ‘there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.’

“But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut.

“Later the others also came. ‘Lord, Lord,’ they said, ‘open the door for us!’

“But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I don’t know you.’

“Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day nor the hour.”

Ten is a symbolic number. The virgins who set out to meet their bridegroom represent all mankind; there are no differences between them, they are all invited. In many pages of the Old Testament, God represents himself as the bridegroom because his love is total, unreserved. With the coming of Jesus, God's love finds a face, he becomes a person and - as such – he can invite us to build a relationship with him, in which there can be no distractions, no delays, no second thoughts.

One cannot bargain on love when living in a spousal relationship; likewise, oil can indicate faith, and it may also refer to charity and to how ready we are to get involved with our own life. Why do we need extra oil? Because our faith is tested like gold in the crucible. Sometimes the Lord keeps us waiting for Him, because He wants us to wait for Him with all our hearts, he wants us to seek Him, to truly desire to respond with the love of a bride towards her groom, which is a total and generous love.

SPIRITUALITY

From the Writings of the Fathers of the Church

AUGUSTINE – Sermons, 93, 8

The foolish virgins took their lamps, but did not take oil with them. The fact that they did not take the oil, is a sign that they did not have joy within themselves, but sought it in the praise of others. [...] The wise virgins, however, took oil in vessels along with their lamps. What does “in the vessels” mean? The vessels are a symbol for their hearts. Therefore the Apostle says: “Let everyone examine their own work, and then they will have a good reason for boasting in themselves and not in anyone else.” The oil is the glory that springs from a good conscience; the wise virgins carry it within themselves, because they know that God sees what is hidden in them.

JOHN CHRYSOSTOM – Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew, 78, 1

In this passage, the Lord speaks about virginity to teach us that, although it is a great and angelic virtue, if it is not accompanied by almsgiving and charity, it ends up being condemned along with the prostitutes. [...] The lamp is virginity, but the oil is humanity (mercy). Just as a lamp cannot burn without oil, so virginity cannot shine without charity. Do not think that the oil is something insignificant: it is the nourishment of the light.

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From a letter by Padre Pio to Raffaelina Cerase

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

What I desire from you is that you devote your spirit to the contemplation of the infinite treasures of the heavenly Spouse. These he is also pouring out into your soul by large quantities, by handfuls, and I want you to delight in his riches and be excited with the desire of possessing them.

I would like you to imitate those brides of this world, who admire nothing else and take pleasure in nothing else but the beautiful gifts and qualities of their spouses, without paying much attention to whether and how they correspond to the demonstrations of affection that their spouses show them. If you endeavour to follow, as I hope, this suggestion of mine, great will be the gain of your spirit.

On Holy Saturday 1914, Padre Pio wrote to Raffaelina Cerase a letter filled with gratitude for her prayers. A small detail makes us understand that this was not merely a formal expression of gratitude; rather, it was as if Padre Pio had experienced a true communion of spirit, because he knew the content of those prayers. Although the birth of the Prayer Groups was still far in the future, a need was taking shape in his spirit, something indispensable connected with praying together. Indeed, his words gradually become the expression of an inner and spiritual communion, and he confides his own suffering to his spiritual daughter. According to him, therefore, there is no point in praying for material health, but rather for spiritual health

After a series of very appropriate and precise pleasantries and recommendations, in the third part of the letter Padre Pio entered fully into the core of his spiritual direction, encouraging his spiritual daughter to be attentive to the work of upheaval and disorder brought about by the devil. He then came to the attention she should devote to Our Lord Jesus Christ: she should concentrate as much as possible on the treasures of her Bridegroom; take pleasure in his riches; imitate the brides of this world who have no other attention than on the gifts and qualities of their spouses; give no importance if they do not immediately perceive the response of generosity and love of their bridegroom. It is precisely this last aspect (let us read it bilaterally, otherwise we could lapse into fourth-rate feminism), which gives us an idea of the hard relationship with the Lord, who made Padre Pio fall in love, welcomed him, although he sometimes felt as if his mystical impulses were to leave the Lord indifferent.

Conquering the groom

There are different ways of talking about meditation. In the Eastern world it is a highly popular introspective method. The image of a groom attracting his bride, as rhetorical as it might appear, is actually the best that Christian Tradition can offer in this regard. The letter to the Hebrews writes: "The Word of God is living, to the point, it is sharper than any two-edged sword; it penetrates to the dividing point of soul and spirit, to the joints and marrow, and discerns the feelings and thoughts of the heart" (Heb 4:12).

Monsignor Luciano Monari, a biblical scholar and bishop from Brescia, comments on this verse as follows: "We read these words with amazement, we are fascinated. But is it really so? Does listening to the Word of God get there? And in what way does it really get there? The Word of God is not just a truth to be understood; it is a truth to be loved, to be internalised, to be made one's own, to be put into practice in our concrete existence. We need time and perseverance to become familiar with all this.

To meditate with the Word is to perceive the bridegroom who enters into our story, he adorns us with his love, his jewels, fills us with his presence. Listening to the Word in moments of dryness of heart and when life seems to rage against us, means experiencing this God who comes to visit us.

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Bishop Munari reminds us that time and perseverance are required to gain this. Although with the Word God comes to visit us, it is as if we must strive to conquer the bridegroom, to be possessed by Him, so that He can then drag us towards heaven. "Let us take heart, O Annita," writes Padre Pio to Annita Rodote, 'let us take a look at the divine Master who prays in the garden, and let us discover the true ladder that unites earth to heaven; we will see that humility, contrition and prayer make this distance that passes between man and God disappear, and make God descend as far as man and man rise as far as God, so that we end up understanding, loving and possessing one another'. (Epist. III, p. 96)

A bond of love

As we have mentioned several times, Padre Pio insisted a great deal on meditating on the Word of God. He recommended a method for meditation that was influenced by the spirituality of his time. Our attention, therefore, is turned not so much to the way of listening to and deepening the Word, but rather to those attitudes that predispose and accompany the conversation with God. Awareness of the existence and the capacity to welcome a supernatural presence in us was much emphasised earlier, the image of the bridegroom we are evoking speaks of a dialogue that cannot take place between strangers or casual visitors.

In this regard, it must be remembered that, in the context of a dialogue of love, the renunciation of sin is fundamental. According to Padre Pio (the dialogue is reported by Father Eusebio), the observation and obedience to the commandments is not to be linked to respect for the law, but to love. 'My son,' he told his brother Eusebio, 'you also think that sin is a transgression of a law. No, my son. Sin is the betrayal of love. What has the Lord done for me and what do I do for him?'. For St Teresa too, meditation is living a deep bond of love with God. Regarding sin, she frames God's mercy in this way: 'I got tired of offending him before he got tired of forgiving me' (V 19:15).

Meditation for the little ones

The love that develops in meditation will be simple and spontaneous if we are not concerned with finding complicated topics or difficult spiritual paths to follow, but rather if we have the ability to make ourselves small. Again in the letter to Annita Rodote that we have already quoted, Padre Pio wrote: "Therefore, when you feel oppressed by temptation, the means to compel God to come to our aid is humility of spirit, contrition of heart, and confident prayer. If you do, it is impossible for God not to put on a good face, not to yield, not to come to your aid. The power of God triumphs over everything; but the humble and sorrowful prayer triumphs over God himself, stops his arm, extinguishes his thunderbolt, disarms him, overcomes him, appeases him and makes him rely on us like a friend".

Humility and surrender are the fundamental elements to affirm the primacy of God in our lives. It happens, at times, that when someone speaks to us, we immediately feel compelled to look for words to answer them; we certainly do not want to listen to the Word in order to reply to God, but the temptation to immediately think of what we should do, what we should say to him, how to reply, can make us miss the beauty of his visit. To affirm the primacy of God in meditation is to make us the little ones who enjoy welcoming Him, those who are happy to consider that He is there, all for us. Meditation in the place where we exist, is giving it the right importance through sharing it with God. We share with Him our dreams, our desires. Let us try to lower the walls of our distrust and preconceptions, let us try to live that silence that makes us hear 'the sound of God' in our lives. Jesus is the bridegroom, if He comes, let us celebrate Him, let us welcome Him with lit lamps, He will take care of the rest.

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A GUIDE TO MEDITATION FOLLOWING PADRE PIO'S INSTRUCTIONS TO BLESSED MARIA GARGANI To Maria Gargani, San Giovanni Rotondo 16th of September 1916, *Epist. III, 249*

Mental prayer or meditation should be done as follows. First of all prepare the point or subject you wish to meditate on. There is not always a need to resort to a book to prepare the subject to be meditated upon, since every truth of our religion can and must be the object of meditation for the Christian soul. And here it should be noted that the soul should habitually meditate on the life, passion and death of our Lord Jesus. No soul is to neglect this, however close to the ways of God she may be.

Having prepared the matter to be meditated upon, place yourselves in the presence of God, humbling yourselves deeply in consideration [of] who you are and to whom you present yourselves. Ask God for the grace to do the mental prayer that you are about to do well, that you may obtain that fruit which God wants you to obtain from it. Finally, commend yourselves to the intercession of the most Holy Virgin, as well as to all the heavenly court, that they may help you to meditate well and to keep away all distractions and temptations from you.

Having done this, you will enter a proper state of meditation, which must revolve around that point which you prepared and set out at the beginning. Having meditated on the subject in all its particular points well, you then move on to the resolutions. Aim to amend yourselves of those faults that do not let you unite with God and which are the cause of many other faults and sins. You may want to offer to practise such and such a virtue and then, once you have acquired it, you can stop.

Finally, you will then move on to ask God for all those graces and helps that you feel the need of. You will recommend all men to the Lord, both in general and in particular. You will pray for the restoration of the kingdom of God, for the propagation of the faith, for the exaltation and triumph of our Holy Mother, the Church. You shall pray for the living; you shall pray for the dead; you shall pray for the infidels and heretics and for the conversion of sinners.

Having done all this, you will offer up your meditation and prayer, together with the offering of your whole self, as well as of all those people who are most dear to you, you will offer, I say, everything to God together with the merits of Jesus and of his and our Mother. And all this you will offer through the hands of Mary most holy, of the Guardian Angel, of Saint Joseph, etc.

Lastly, a brief examination of how you have conducted yourself in the said meditation; and, recognising that you are defective, you will humble yourself before God, asking for his forgiveness by offering your atonement.

With regard to the practice of such meditation, I encourage you to set yourself at least two times a day in which you will retire to the practice of this exercise. You will endeavour to spend if possible not less than half an hour at each time. You will see that these periods of time in which you can meditate are, if possible, in the morning to prepare yourselves for the battle of the day and in the evening so as to purify your soul of every earthly affection that may have attached to it during the day.

Prayer to St Pio by Cardinal Angelo Comastri

Padre Pio you lived in the century of pride, and you were so humble.

Padre Pio no one heard His Voice around you: and yet you spoke to God.

Near you no one saw the Light: and you saw God.

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

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

Amen