



"Jesus is my hope, and the living source of my happiness"
Padre Pio Prayer Groups, pilgrims of hope

FIFTH SHRINE

FREEDOM OF HEART

BIBLE COMMENTARY

From the First Letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians (9:16-23)

In fact, proclaiming the Gospel is not a boast for me, it is rather a necessity that I feel as a duty: woe to me if I were not to proclaim the Gospel! If I did it on my own initiative, I would be entitled to the reward; but as I do not do it on my own initiative, it is a task that has been entrusted to me. What, then, is my reward? That of proclaiming the Gospel freely, without using the right which was conferred onto me by the Gospel itself.

For although I was free from all, I made myself the servant of all in order to gain the greatest number of them: I became a Jew among the Jews, in order to gain the Jews. For those who are under the Law, though I am not under the Law, I have made myself as one who is under the Law, in order to gain those who are under the Law. For those who have no law—though I am not without the law of God, but rather being in the law of Christ—I have made myself as one who is without law, in order to gain those who are without law. I made myself weak for the weak, to gain the weak; I did everything for everyone, so that I could save someone at all costs. I do everything for the Gospel, to become part of it."

Saint Paul refers here to the proclamation of the Gospel as a duty. The term used by the Apostle to indicate his mission is *'anagkē'* (destiny/fate): evangelization is thus a "destiny", in the sense that it is the core of God's plan for humanity. It is the path that God chose to save man, calling him from death to life through the Easter Mystery of Jesus Christ.

In this logic of "service", we might recall the recommendation Paul gave the Corinthians on how to behave in the case of meat sacrificed to idols, which he had written about in the previous chapter (cf. *1 Cor 8*). The question of how to confront a series of traditions mutilated by the Old Testament constantly returns. The Apostle indicates two principles by which believers must be inspired. First of all, that of "freedom" to choose and act according to the style of the Gospel. Closely linked to freedom is the principle of "charity", which is the foundation of the whole Law. From the combination of freedom and charity comes the fraternal communion that overcomes all self-centredness, all opposition (strong and weak) and allows the dynamism of the Gospel to be incarnated.

Paul's testimony is eloquent. He wrote about his own change of perspective: from the normative constraints of the Mosaic Law, to the universalism of the Gospel. For this reason, he was "everything for the Gospel", in the sense that the spiritual dynamism that allowed him to encounter Jesus Christ was the same dynamism that allowed him to be all things to all people. The splendid definition of verse 23 sums up the style and method of evangelization: he is "a sharer in the saving message which the Lord has entrusted to him" (cf. *Acts 9:15*). From the "measure" of the Jewish precepts, he moved on to preaching of Christ crucified and risen "without measure"! The Christian mission is the path on which the Apostle encounters every man... experiencing how the gift of charity is expressed in our "yes" to Christ.

The message of salvation is so central to Paul's preaching that it overcomes every limit coming from the different interpretations and observances of the law. It is a message of profound freedom, not only because it is proclaimed to every man and woman, but because he feels the urgency to share it with everyone, whether strong or weak.



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SPIRITUALITY

From Padre Pio's letter to Raffaolina Cerase (Epist. II, p. 229)

Yes, all Christians are resurrected in Jesus through Baptism, we are raised to a supernatural life, we acquire the beautiful hope that one day we will be sitting gloriously on a heavenly throne. This is such an extraordinary dignity that is given to each one of us! Our vocation makes us continually strive for the homeland of the blessed, just as pilgrims in the land of exile. Part of our vocation as Christians is that of not setting our hearts on the things of this world; all the care, all the study of the good Christian, who lives according to his vocation, are directed towards the eternal goods. We must be able to give the things on earth their true value, so as to get to appreciate only those that help us attain eternal goods.

Padre Pio recommended the virtue of hope as the engine that drives us to desire to achieve salvation. Referring to the traditional doctrine, according to which hope is a theological virtue, he described how it can be achieved: the Christian who receives Baptism is linked to the resurrection of Jesus and – therefore – to a new, supernatural life; it is in that life that he acquires the virtue of hope, which consists principally of the desire to "sit gloriously on the heavenly throne."

The Hope of Salvation

For St. Paul, the law of God is a guide (he calls it a "teacher"), while the covenant is the means for the Jewish people to identify themselves as the people of God through a path of communion. It is not possible, according to him, to live freedom in a way that we could define as "union": "I observe the law and file the practice of God"; "I inquire as far as I can act before committing sin and then I live my life and God is there to watch." The worst thing is condemned by Jesus in the Gospel: "I am saved by the simple fact that I was born into the people of God."

Salvation is something more, it engages our way of thinking about God, while continually cultivating a relationship of love with Him. Salvation must be hoped for every day.

A professor of mathematics presented himself to Padre Pio, with a speech very similar to that of the rich young man of the Gospel (cf. *Mt* 19:20): "Father, I and my family observe not only all the commandments of God's law, but also the precepts of the Church, the obligation of Sunday Mass."

This was Padre Pio's answer: "Ah, yes! And don't you dare do something more! God forbid you and spare you! I am not surprised, because I know you well: you do always and only what is strictly necessary to remain within the limits of the law. Beware of excesses in good works, otherwise you may fall ill with heart or nerves." The freedom of the Gospel is freedom of the heart, from wanting to measure what we must give to God. Freedom is giving space to the movement of faith, avoiding crystallizing ourselves in the certainty that what we do is enough. Freedom is knowing how to accept our neighbour as a new gift of the Spirit, not as the one who has come to take something away from us. "Quiet is reserved for heaven," wrote Padre Pio, "where the palm of victory awaits us. While on earth we must always fight between hope and fear, on the condition, however, that hope is always stronger, always keeping in mind the all-powerful God, who is willing to help us at all times. Do not tire of working steadfastly, with confidence and resignation for your own amendment and perfection" (*Epist.* III, p. 736).

Cultivating the Virtue of Hope

Pope Francis encourages us to live the Jubilee as the year of hope: "... in fact, everyone needs to find the joy of living again, because the human being, which was created in the image and likeness of God (cf. *Gen* 1:26), cannot be content with surviving or adapting to the present times by being satisfied by merely material realities. This encloses us in an individualism that corrodes hope, and generates a sadness that lurks in the heart, making us sour and intolerant" (*Spes non confundit*, n. 9). In itself, hope can simply be an element of our character: we often say that there are people who are naturally inclined to "always see their glass as half full", rather than half empty, that is, they always manage to



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find a reason for hope. In reality, however, hope is not just something instinctive. Rather it is a virtue that is given to us by the Holy Spirit, and we call it a theological virtue.

Benedict XVI described it as a performative virtue, that is, capable of "producing facts and changing lives." Let us try, through his words, to understand what the "facts" that spring from hope might be.

"Redemption," wrote Benedict XVI, "is offered to us in the sense that we have been given hope, a reliable hope, by virtue of which we can face our present: the present, even a tiring present, can be lived and accepted if it leads to a specific goal and if we can be sure of this goal, if it is so great as to justify the fatigue of the journey."

The fruit of the freedom of our hearts makes us overcome "the measure" in relation to God. The awareness of our freedom helps us look at our present in a new way, if we let hope shed light on it. We would like to say once more that while it is legitimate to hope for a miracle, we cannot reduce the expectation of God's intervention to this. Christian hope helps us understand the meaning of the cross. In this regard, Padre Pio was extremely demanding. Father Pellegrino used to tell: "In recent days I have seen Pasqualina Vona cry and I have asked her why. She replied that she did not receive absolution from him, only because she complained a little about the crosses she had received from the Lord." Father Pellegrino's comment was eloquent: "This seems a bit too much to me!" And in fact, he talked about it with Padre Pio, who because of the secrecy of the confession obviously did not want to enter into the specific question. However he explained the meaning of that harsh teaching: "The worst would be to suffer without Jesus." That method (which he himself did not imitate) was so demanding but at the same time it gave the true sense of hope: to perceive the presence of Jesus next to us, in the hope of living eternally with him.

Cyrenians of hope

After this generic reflection, however, Padre Pio added a comment about himself: "If I don't ask these people for some help, who should I ask?". Padre Pio said to some of his spiritual daughters, among those closest to him: "You should all strive to help this Simon of Cyrene who is carrying Jesus' cross for us all", (*Sweetest God* Epist. M, p. 191). "Please remember me when you pray Jesus and help this Cyrenian who is carrying the cross for all", (*Epist. III*, p. 779).

Carlo Campanini often reported an outburst from Padre Pio: "Everyone asks me to take the cross away from them, no one asks me to help me carry it." This was also often seen in the spiritual direction of Padre Pio. He felt called to give a different hope to the people he met, as they often turned to him to solve their immediate problems, rather than meeting someone who opened them to the horizons of eternity. All this, however, he did not do just with a word of encouragement or with a few more reproaches: the freedom of Padre Pio's heart pushed him to offer his sacrifices each time together with those of Christ for the salvation of these souls. Of the people he spiritually directed and whom he considered capable of doing so, he asked this total gift of their freedom: they were encouraged to open their hearts, with their crosses and their sufferings, to the service of the Kingdom of God.

PRAYER

Prayer of John Paul II to St. Pio of Pietrelcina

Humble and beloved Padre Pio, teach us, we ask you, humility of heart so 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 recognize right away in the poor and suffering the face of Jesus. Sustain us in the hour of the combat and of the trial and, if we fall, make us experience the joy of the sacrament of Forgiveness.

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

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

HYMN