

FIRST STRING: THE ENCOUNTER WITH GOD

BIBLICAL COMMENTARY

From the Gospel according to John (15:1–11)

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. 11 These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.”

The Father is the vinedresser, Jesus is the vine: He depends on Him, He belongs to Him. In the Gospels, we meet Jesus along the various episodes of His Baptism, then His temptations in the desert, His miracles, up to the narration of His Passion, and it is through prayer, that Jesus comes to terms with His relationship with the Father, in its essential truth. Jesus is linked to the Father by the obedience he owes Him as a son, which is essentially love and conveys his unity with the Father.

In the parable of the True Vine, Jesus asks that we should live with him a form of unity which is similar to that which he lives with the Father. To achieve this goal, constancy in prayer is needed. This allows us to discover the Trinitarian bond, which reaches and transforms our lives. It is not a question of us being as slaves to this, rather that of discovering a sense of belonging, thus becoming so intimate with Jesus that the love of the Father pours out on Him, reaches every disciple like the sap that passes through the stump of the vine to all the branches and maintains them alive and capable of bearing abundant fruit.

In particular, when we pray and intercede for others, the Lord does not see us as strangers who ask God for something, but as people who belong to him, who can intercede and trust to be heard. Prayer binds the disciple to the Lord, like the vine to its branches, and makes him experience the full joy of the Gospel.

SPIRITUALITY

From a letter of Padre Pio to Annita Rodote (Letters III)

I give heartfelt thanks to the heavenly Father, through his most beloved Son, Jesus, for all those graces which he bestowed and keeps bestowing on your souls, despite all your faults. How good the Lord is to everyone; but he is even more so to those who have a true and sincere desire to please him in everything, and who fulfil the divine plan in themselves.

*You, too, must learn to more greatly recognize and adore the divine will in all the events of life. As often as you can, you should seek to repeat the divine words of our dearest Master: *Fiat voluntas Dei, sicut in caelo et in terra.* (Let your will be done, Lord, on earth as it is in Heaven). Yes, let this beautiful exclamation always be in your heart and on your lips throughout all the events of your life. Say it in times of affliction; say it in times of temptation and during the trials to which Jesus wants to subject you. Say it again when you feel yourself submerged in the ocean of love for Jesus; it will be your anchor and your salvation. Do not fear the enemy; he will not launch anything against the little ship of your spirit because Jesus is the helmsman and Mary is the star.*

Prayer as Relationship

Padre Pio used to converse with God because He saw Him as the Whole, the Highest Good, the One to whom he referred to every moment of his day. His prayer originated from his faith, that perceived Jesus as a real and personal presence in his life. His ethical choices led him to put God at the top of all of his choices and behaviours.

Every man and woman bring their personal story and their fears into their encounter with the Lord, and by doing so they overcome all sorts of stereotyped formulas. Their entrusting their whole lives into His hands bears a mirror-like similarity to the biblical prayers, where God manifests Himself to man and asks him to talk. Man is filled by this presence, and just like Abraham, he is dazzled by His promises; Moses on Mount Sinai takes off his sandals recognizing his weakness and shouts "Speak Lord, as your servant is listening"; Samuel admits he is disappointed and Jeremiah feels he has been abandoned.

Padre Pio's spiritual school begins right here, from this kind of relationship which is made of trust, friendship and obedience. Prayer is nothing more than the highest expression of this relationship, the place where we meet and experience this intense relationship made of love.

All of this is clear in the letters that Padre Pio wrote to a humble person, Annita Rodote, who did not have our hesitations and mental complications, but was looking for a life of simple and essential holiness. In the correspondence between Padre Pio and Raffaelina Cerase, he refers to Annita as "the seamstress". She was an orphan who often went to the Cerases' house. There she learned how to sew and was educated in the faith by the "good Francesca", a pious elderly family friend who led a holy life.

The correspondence with her is particularly interesting because in his writing Padre Pio lays the foundations of her spiritual path. When Annita began the correspondence with Padre Pio she was 24, and by then she already led a life of piety; however she was not sure about her vocational choice and she also mentioned some supernatural manifestations that left both Father Agostino and Donna Raffaelina perplexed.

Padre Pio therefore arrives into her life and tries to bring both normality and at the same time profound contents that can be essential points of reference for a spiritual journey. Let's see the subjects they dealt with in the letters of the first year.

After a letter of introduction and encouragement to overcome the difficulties of her spiritual journey, on the 6th of February 1915 Padre Pio wrote to recommend that Jesus should be at the centre of her interior life. He is the helmsman and the model of the soul: "Do not fear the enemy, it will not have any power against the ship of your spirit, because the helmsman is Jesus, the star is Mary" (Ep. III, p. 55). The inner and the outer order are fundamental in one's spiritual life, for this reason Padre Pio's urged her to overcome restlessness and to have a precise time in which to do her devotions. Starting from this letter, then, Padre Pio recommended she should devote some time to personal meditation, based above all on the life of Jesus.

Padre Pio mentioned meditation again in his letter of 8th of March 1915, suggesting she took the life of Christ as a reference, in particular his passion, death and resurrection. Musing over Christ's humanity intrinsically tied to His divinity, Anita would meet Him as One in the Eucharist, the place of her contemplation where she could come to celebrate Him.

As you may have noticed, what we have so far called the "prayer of relationship" is not a set of difficult formulas, but, on the contrary, a simple and immediate way of placing ourselves before God: our interior life is the fruit of our desire to establish an affectionate and open conversation with Jesus through careful prayer, meditation and the celebration of the sacraments.

The Journey of a Prayer Group

In the apostolic exhortation *Gaudete et exultate*, Pope Francis describes the evils of our time and those categories of thought present outside, but also within Christianity (especially Gnosticism and Pelagianism), which undermine the Christian life, adapting it to one's own way of being and depriving it of that drive to continual conversion which is the characteristic of the evangelical proclamation: "although it seems obvious, - he writes - let us remember that holiness is made up of our habitual openness to transcendence, which is

expressed in prayer and worship. The saint is a person with a prayerful spirit who needs to communicate with God "(GE, n. 147).

The difficulties we encounter in praying with our own words often lead us to prefer formulas written by others or prayers consecrated by Christian tradition, such as the Holy Rosary. Precisely with regard to the rosary, however, Padre Pio often spoke about the need to escape from customary habits, while we should endeavour to make it a meditative prayer, in which the words are followed by the attitude of the heart, the need to communicate our feelings to God, in the certainty that the search for good and joy we have in our hearts can find a full and satisfying answer in Him: "The Lord asks for everything, - continues the Pope - and what He offers is true life, the happiness for which we were created "(GE, n. 1).

Living a journey within a Prayer Group means engaging in this search for a personal, gratifying, enlightening encounter with the person of Christ; having said this, we should bear in mind that the encounter with Him demands our desire to belong to him, to put him at the centre of our lives. Sometimes the heart is not ready for this yet, other times it is difficult to heal the memory and the wounds of our past.

There remains only the silence and the humble prayer of the publican: "O God, have mercy on me. I am a sinner!". It will be in that moment that our sanctification and our testimony will begin. If I see myself as a sinner, if I confess my poverty to God and the need to meet him, he will come to me and take up residence in my heart. Padre Pio's famous phrase, " Sanctify yourself and sanctify your neighbour", is not the proud prayer of the sinner, but the humble testimony of those who, in silence, seek to live their life as a forgiven and redeemed person. In Rome, during the meeting with young people in preparation for the 2018 Synod, the Pope Francesco recounted this episode: "Once, at a lunch with young people in Krakow, a young man told me:" I have a problem at my college, because I have a partner who is agnostic. Tell me, Father, what should I say to this agnostic comrade to make him understand that ours is the true religion? ". I replied: "My dear, the last thing you have to do is tell him something. Begin to live as a Christian, and he will ask you why you live that way "».

Thus we arrive at the first note, the first string of this instrument that wants to lead us to praise: let God dwell in your heart, and you will tell the world of his mercy.

A crown for victory

To make people understand how important his relationship with God was since his adolescence, Padre Pio spoke about a vision he had shortly before entering the novitiate. A mysterious and beautiful character led little Francesco (Padre Pio) to a place where there were other white-dressed characters. In front of them there was a large group of black-faced people from which a huge Ethiopian stood out. Francesco was told that he should fight against him. Despite being scared, he started to fight, and when he was about to succumb, the beautiful character came to rescue him, led him to victory, handed him a crown, together with the promise of yet another crown if he were to fight again against that horrible character to the end.

The Lord made the young Francesco understand that he would be involved in a seemingly unequal struggle against evil. From this he would emerge victorious, if he knew how he should live precisely that privileged relationship with Jesus on a daily basis, if he knew how to bind himself fully and definitively to Him.

PRAYER: "PRAYERFUL BREATH"

«You should practise both personal prayer, which is to be nourished by the Word of God, and community prayer, always in harmony with that "prayerful breath" which is the Church, and which is expressed in the Liturgy. As for Padre Pio, for you too the Sacraments of the Eucharist and Reconciliation are to be the two cornerstones of your spiritual life. Mass and Confession are the privileged means of the dynamism between Death and the Resurrection, which springs from the power of Christ's sacrifice".

(St. John Paul II *To all members of Prayer Groups*, 5th October 1996).

OCTOBER 7
FEAST OF OUR LADY OF THE ROSARY
THE CEREMONY OF THE ROSARY HANDOUT

The Rosary is the prayer Padre Pio entrusted as a sign of identity to his Prayer Groups. The Ceremony of the Rosary handout was instituted to unite us with Mary so that the Church may always enjoy her protection. On October 7 (or another date chosen with the Spiritual Assistant), the Group gathers for catechesis and the Gift (real or symbolic) of the Rosary. The rosaries are blessed, and members renew their commitment to pray it faithfully.

ACT OF ENTRUSTMENT TO ST. PIO

O glorious St. Pio of Pietrelcina,
you are the Saint of this new millennium,
you are our friend and the consoler of our souls.

You help all of us, sinners.

By your suffering
you understand all our sufferings.

To you we entrust our requests for all that is good,
for us and for our loved ones;
to you we entrust our spirits,
so that they may learn how to bear
all the sorrows in our hearts.

To you we entrust the plea to present
our souls to the Virgin of all Graces,
to obtain eternal salvation from the Lord;
to you we entrust our request for intercession
to obtain from the Divine Goodness the grace ...

(Mention your intention)

we so ardently desire.

Keep us under your protection,
defend us from the snares of the Evil One
and above all intercede to the Most High
that through the forgiveness of our sins
we may persevere in doing good.

3 Glory be to the Father...

HYMN