

Key Aspects of Biblical and Patristic Spirituality

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Abstract: Biblical and patristic spirituality is primarily experiential, as it conveys the spiritual experience of the hagiographers and the Fathers themselves. The latter were either bishops or simple monks: in both their homilies and the treatises they wrote, they shared their personal experience—that is, their personal relationship of prayer with God that transformed their lives. To speak of the spirituality of the Fathers or of their love for the imperishable and eternal beauty recorded in the Philokalia means to share in the experience of those who “fear God, who believe in the incarnation of His Son, and who, through faith, receive the work of the Holy Spirit in their hearts, and therefore deserve to be called spiritual fathers.”²

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The Holy Spirit is at the Origin of Christian Life

The spiritual life of the Church of Christ was born at Pentecost, with the continuous outpouring of the Holy Spirit into the world. This conviction is the fruit of the communal and spiritual experience of the Holy Spirit. Man is deemed spiritual from the moment of his “adoption” (*hyiothesia*) at Baptism, when he receives the anointing of the Spirit (*chrism*) and acquires the status of a son of God by grace. The Greek Fathers speak of the re-creation of man in the image of the Son (*Christophoros*). Spiritual is in fact “one who no longer lives according to the flesh but is guided by the Spirit of God, for he acquires the name of the Son of God and becomes like

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² Cf. St. Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adv. Haer.*, V, IX, 2.

the image of the Only Begotten Son.”³ Contrary to any Gnostic interpretation, which identifies the spirit—by secularizing it—with the immaterial part of the human body, and thus with any intellectual activity of the soul, thereby exalting intellectual knowledge, the Fathers spoke of an anthropological trichotomy: “The perfect man is composed of three elements: body, soul, and spirit,”⁴ and the Holy Spirit, uniting with the human spirit, encompasses the whole soul (see 1 *Thessalonians* 5:23). This is not a theology that privileges or emphasizes the effort of the rational human logos, exercised with all its power, but rather draws from the religious sources of a knowledge connected to life in Christ experienced through the grace of the Holy Spirit. The theology of the Fathers is a spiritual one because their knowledge leads you to love, and intellectual effort is conceived within the context of the experience of the revealed mysteries.

Holy Scripture, the Fundamental Text of Spiritual Life

The fundamental text for theological and spiritual reflection is Holy Scripture, the first gift of the Holy Spirit, the grace that helps us understand the Scriptures, whose center and key to understanding is Christ. The Bible is valued in its entirety, without any censorship. Scriptural texts are continually cited as the basis for argumentation in the preaching of the Word of God. When we compare the entire Christian interpretive tradition of antiquity—that is, the patristic and medieval periods—with the modern period, in terms of the spiritual aspect of theology, we observe a striking difference. For the Church Fathers of the East and West, exegesis, theology, spirituality, and pastoral care constituted an “organic whole.”

The Church Fathers represent a fundamental era through their witness of faith, an enduring source for authentic Christian theology. It is not easy to summarize their teaching. I will limit myself to highlighting their perseverance in interpreting Scripture, in which the Fathers were unparalleled teachers. There is no need to simply repeat their exegesis, since they did not yet have the many

³ St. Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit*, 26, 61.

⁴ St. Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.*, V, IX, 3.

valid tools that modern biblical scholarship offers us, nor is it a matter of reviving the allegorical method, which they often abused. However, we must retain a luminous and essential aspect of their research: the centrality of the Word of God in the deepening of Christian thought to interpret and extend sacred history “in corde Ecclesiae” and “pro Ecclesia.”

In fact, the very heart of patristic theology is the Word of God revealed in Holy Scripture. It is no exaggeration to say that the Church Fathers and Writers are truly “interpreters of the Word” and “commentators on the holy books.” For them, Holy Scripture is not merely a reference book, but the “Book of Life,” that sure life which leads man to the discovery of the Kingdom of God and to full communion with Him. Their theological formation is grounded in Holy Scripture, and its reading and meditation draw them like a secret, spiritual garden, akin to the Garden of Eden, where man can find the nourishment necessary to advance on the path of perfection and remain in communion with God, the Creator. The Fathers “breathe Scripture,” which becomes for them the bread and nourishment of their “daily meditation” on the Word. In this foundational text of their formation, they commented on homilies, catechesis, scholia, eulogia, questions and answers, treatises, hypotyposes, stromata, glaphyra, epistles, hypotheses, lives, and antirrhetikos, proposing a re-interpretative reading of the salvific event for the Christian community (cf. G. Dorival for the various literary genres used by the Church Fathers⁵). In this light, the unity between Scripture, theology, spirituality, and pastoral care is so evident to the Church Fathers that the true and profound meaning of Holy Scripture (*sensus plenior*) for them consists in understanding and intuiting the “spirit” of the letter hidden within the sacred text. It is this inspired understanding that leads them to the contemplative vision (*theoria*) of divine truth and reality, transmitted through the inspiring work of the Holy Spirit. Their essential insight is this: the entire Scripture, both the Old and New Testaments, speaks to us of Christ and concerns every human person. They call this methodological approach the “spiritual, inspired understanding” of Scripture. Within this unified vision of

⁵ G. Dorival, “Antichità cristiana greca e Bibbia,” in *Dizionario Enciclopedico della Bibbia* (Rome: Borla/Città Nuova, 1995), 122–4.

the two Testaments, they addressed the four senses of Holy Scripture, in which exegesis, theology, spiritual life, and ecclesial-communal commitment converge.

Lectio divina is an individual or communal reading of a passage of Scripture, long or short, received as the Word of God and developed under the impulse of the Holy Spirit in meditation, prayer, and contemplation. The practice of regular, even daily, reading of Scripture corresponds to an ancient practice of the Church. As a collective practice, it is attested in the third century, during the time of Origen, who prepared his homilies based on a continuous reading of Scripture throughout the week. At that time, there were daily gatherings devoted to reading and explaining the Scripture.⁶

Thus, Origen would be the first Christian writer in whom we find the first precise reference to the practice of a “divine reading” of Scripture: *theia anagnōsis* (θεία ἀνάγνωσις). Origen adopted this practice from Judaism, especially since he was educated among Jewish scholars, from whom he learned this manner of studying the Word of God and meditating on it daily—a meditation associated with the ascetic effort of purification from passions and prayer (προσέχειν). Prayer was performed with the Word, and the Word was heard in Prayer. All the Church Fathers of the East and West practiced this method of “divine reading” (*Lectio divina* / *theia anagnōsis*), inviting the faithful to do the same and thus laying the foundation for the composition of commentaries on Scripture, which stand as a testimony to this day. It was the way to maintain a continuous connection with the God-inspired Scriptures through *lectio divina*, through attentive meditation accompanied by prayer.

In the New Testament, Saint Paul urged his disciple Timothy: “to pay attention to the reading [of Scripture], to exhortation, to teaching” (προσεχε τῇ ἀναγνώσει, τῇ παρακλήσει, τῇ διδασκαλίᾳ) and especially “to meditate on these [the Scriptures], (ταῦτα μελέτα),” so that his spiritual progress might be evident to all (cf. 1 Tim 4:13–16). In the Christian experience, spiritual meditation on Scripture begins with the memorization and repetition of Scripture texts, so that they may thus become food for

⁶ Origen, *Homily on Genesis*, X, 1.

the soul. This concept is expressed through the metaphors of “chewing,” “ruminating” (*ruminatio*), and “macerating” (*myrikizein*). In Greek, the verb refers to the specific work of the bee, enclosed in the small hexagonal “cells” (*kellion*) of the honeycomb, while in Latin the idea of “chewing” the word is inspired by *Leviticus* 11:3 and *Deuteronomy* 14:6, where ruminant animals (*ruminanti*) are classified among the clean. Both semantic references imply a context of rest, peace, solitude, and quiet. The “chewing” of the word occurs mysteriously and almost of its own accord, automatically: αὐτομάτῃ ἢ γῆ καρποφορεῖ, (*Mark* 4:28).

This method of meditating on the Word of God was adopted by both the Greek and Latin Fathers through the tradition of Egyptian monasticism. The early monks constantly referred to the text of Scripture, reciting memorized passages in communal gatherings or in solitude. It was more than a mere exercise in memorization. The texts were read aloud, and the purpose of monastic meditation was to create an atmosphere conducive to prayer. In the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, the words *melete/meletao* are considered technical terms denoting the recitation of Scripture texts and, by extension, their contemplation or meditation on their meaning. It is said of Abba Macarius the Egyptian that he advised a brother tempted by the spirit of fornication to “fast until evening, practice asceticism, and learn by heart passages from the Gospel and the other Scriptures. In *The Life of Anthony the Great*, as well as in other writings of Egyptian monasticism—such as the “Rules of Saint Pachomius,” *The Lausiac History*, or *The Historia Monachorum*—there are numerous examples of elderly monks who, during liturgical gatherings or while performing manual labor, recited psalms or other texts from memory. Newcomers to the monastery were required to memorize at least the Psalms and the New Testament.

For Saint John Cassian, the constant reading and meditation of Scripture is part of the monk’s ascetic effort alongside fasting, vigils, and manual labor, with the aim of keeping the mind engaged in holy work by guarding it against dangerous thoughts, as well as a means of stabilizing the wandering mind:

“I maintain that it depends largely on us to direct our thoughts, to nurture in our hearts only what is holy and spiritual,

not what is earthly and carnal. That is why we read constantly (*frequens lectio*) and meditate on Scripture (*et iugis adhibetur meditatio scripturarum*), so that we may give our memory the opportunity to receive spiritual things; that is why we often sing psalms, to immerse ourselves in their atmosphere, that is why we keep vigil, fast, and pray without ceasing, so that our heart may reject earthly things and be filled with heavenly ones.”⁷ “If, as I have said, we constantly turn to meditation on the holy Scriptures (*ad sanctarum scripturarum meditationem iugiter recurramus*) and direct our memory solely toward spiritual things, and our desires toward perfection and the hope of the life to come, surely our thoughts will be in harmony with our aspirations, which guide us.”⁸ Thus, we understand how the various forms of patristic spirituality are grounded in the biblical experience that they develop and perpetuate.

Holy Scripture and Spiritual Progress

But what definitively marked the relationship between Holy Scripture and spiritual life was probably Origen’s brilliant connection between the books of Holy Scripture, their significance, and the various stages or ages of spiritual growth. “Christianity,” writes Evagrius in Chapter 1 of his work, *Logos praktikos* (The Practical Treatise), “is the teaching of our Savior Jesus Christ, consisting of practice, physics, and theology.”⁹ This tripartite scheme refers to Stoic *paideia*: philosophy comprises ethics, physics, and logic.

In his Commentary on *the Song of Songs*, Origen writes: “There are three general disciplines through which knowledge of things is attained. The Greeks called them *ethical, physical, and enoptic* disciplines; and we may call them *moral, natural, and*

⁷ St. John Cassian, *Spiritual Conversations*, I, 17, trans. Boniface Ramsey (New Jersey: Newman Press, 1997), 320.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 320-1.

⁹ Evagrius Ponticus, *The Practical Treatise and the Gnostic*, Introduction, dossier, translation, and commentary by Cristian Bădiliță (Bucharest: Curtea Veche Publishing House, 2009), 67–9.

contemplative disciplines.”¹⁰ Each discipline or spiritual stage is linked to one of the three books attributed to King Solomon: *morality to Proverbs, the natural sciences to Ecclesiastes, and contemplation to the Song of Songs.*

A century after Origen, Saint Gregory of Nyssa, himself a witness to the common tradition of the Christian East, writes in turn: “The Lord, using Solomon as an instrument, speaks to us through him, first in Proverbs, then in Ecclesiastes, and thereafter in the present philosophy of the Song of Songs, leading us through the word, as along a well-ordered path, toward the perfect ascent. For, just as in bodily life, *not every age has all its works*, nor does our life advance through the same works in *the different ages....*, but rather, in each stage of life, something else is appropriate and fitting; so too can a certain resemblance to bodily stages be seen in souls, through which a well-ordered and uninterrupted path (*akólouthía*) is revealed, leading man toward the virtuous life. For example, Proverbs admonishes in one way, and Ecclesiastes speaks in another. And the philosophy of the Song of Songs is above both, through its lofty doctrines. *The teaching of Proverbs* addresses the one who is still a child, adapting its words to his age. ...then it adds *the wisdom of Ecclesiastes*, after having sufficiently guided him through the instruction of the proverbs *toward the desire for virtues...* And thus, purifying the heart of attachment to visible things, it mysteriously introduces, *through the Song of Songs*, an understanding of the Holy of Holies of God, in which what takes place is a wedding feast, and what is understood is *the union of the human soul with God.*”¹¹

Holy Scriptures the proper nourishment for every stage of life, and the Word of God is at humanity’s disposal to provide spiritual nourishment to the infant, the adult, and the elderly alike. In the first treatise on Christian biblical hermeneutics, the famous work *De Principiis*, Book IV, Chapter 2, Origen draws a connection between the Greek anthropological conception and a Pauline

¹⁰ Origen, *In Canticum*, prologue: PG 13, 73a–77a; Italian translation by Manlio Simonetti (Commento al Cantico dei Cantici) (Rome: Città Nuova, 1976).

¹¹ St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, trans. D. Stăniloae and I. Buga, in *PSB* 29 (Bucharest: EIBMBOR, 1982), 119–20.

quotation from *1 Thessalonians 5:32*: “May the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit (τὸ πνεῦμα), soul (ἡ ψυχὴ), and body (τὸ σῶμα) be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Origen makes the following syllogism: Scripture was given for the salvation of man, of man in his entirety; but man is composed of body, soul, and spirit; therefore, Scripture has *three levels of meaning*: the first level refers to the body (literal, historical), the second to the soul (moral), and the third to the spirit (spiritual). Taking his reasoning further, Origen specifies, adopting the framework used by the Gnostics of his time, that the somatic or bodily meaning of Scripture was for the —the bodily (*somatikoi* = *carnales*)—the second for the *psychikoi* (*psychic*), the moral, who perceive the spiritual-intellectual meaning of the biblical text’s statement, and the third meaning, for the spiritual, is the prerogative of the *pneumatikoi* (*spiritual*). This anthropological vision could be applied to the various stages of the spiritual life in the progress toward the purification from passions and the perfection of man.¹²

Origen realizes that the bodily, literal meaning (*to somatikon*) does not exist in some cases due to errors or incongruous elements that do not fit the logical sequence of spiritual realities, rendering a linear interpretation impossible. His highly complex view of biblical data led him to assert that when the literal meaning is unclear, the moral and spiritual meaning must always be sought, since the entire Scripture, in every part of it, always has a spiritual or mystical meaning.¹³ God Himself willed that both the Old Testament and the New Testament be interspersed with passages or historical accounts whose meaning is impossible to grasp or which provoke confusion and stumbling, with the aim of stimulating the reader and interpreter to deepen their search for the spiritual, deepest meaning (*sensus plenior*).

The great Origen also reminds us of the Jewish tradition of interpreting Scripture: because of its obscurity, the entire Holy Scripture is arranged like a house whose rooms you cannot enter until you open the main door. Next to each room was a key, but it

¹² Origen, *Selected Writings. Part Three. Peri arhon (On Principles)*, 274–5.

¹³ H. Crouzel, *Origen. The Figure, the Exegete, the Spiritual Man, the Theologian* (Sibiu: Deisis, 2014), 137–70.

was not the right one; rather, the keys to all the rooms were scattered about, and you did not know which key would open each one. It was quite difficult to find the right key to open them. Likewise, it must be understood that for Scriptures that are unclear, we will find the means to clarify them not from anywhere else but from the key to explanation scattered among all the other books. For the education and inner discipline of those who wish to attain perfection by following the method of “spiritual reading or *Lectio divina* of Scripture, the Church Fathers emphasize the decisive importance of certain ascetic-disciplinary recommendations known as *De pugna daemonum*.

These recommendations are intended to help the exegete of Scripture free himself, as much as possible, from bodily passions, which can impose a partial, subjective, and one-sided perspective on his understanding of the text under study. The exegete must not concern himself solely with discovering the objectivity and coherence of the text (*akolouthia*), the logical sequence of spiritual realities that have occurred or are occurring; but must be concerned with discovering the revealed meaning of the text and acquiring a mind and heart that allow him to obtain the gift of deep understanding and insight (*theoria*) after being cleansed of passions and attaining dispassion (*apatheia*) and serenity (*galenē*). On the other hand, the exegesis of a text could not claim to have reached its ultimate goal (*skopos*) unless the benefit (*opheleia* or *utilitas*) for the concrete life of the believer and the Church community was evident.

The guarantee and verification of this ideal state of mind and heart were then, in turn, provided by attachment to the *orthodoxia* and *orthopraxia* of the Church. Among the recommendations for the first step on the path of spiritual reading of Scripture are those related to *transcribing, memorizing, translating, and comparing different translations of the text*, which prepare you to move on to the next stage.

Understanding Scripture and the Conversion of the Heart

The Church Fathers were convinced that for a deep understanding of Scripture and for spiritual benefit, one must

approach the Word of God with clean hands, listen to it with a clean ear, read it with a clean eye, and receive and internalize it with a clean heart. *Purity of heart* was considered a concomitant and indispensable work for the deep and spiritual reading of Holy Scripture. Commenting on the text from 2 Corinthians 3:16: “But when they *turn to the Lord*, the veil will be lifted (δὲ ἐὰν ἐπιστρέψῃ πρὸς κύριον περιαιρεῖται τὸ κάλυμμα; cum autem *conversus fuerit ad Deum* aufertur velamen),” Origen concludes: “Therefore, our turning to the Lord is the lifting of the veil. From this we can conclude that as long as we read the holy books without understanding them, as long as they remain incomprehensible and closed to us, we have not yet turned our faces toward the Lord, and if we do not turn toward Him, there is no doubt that the veil is not lifted for us.”¹⁴

This very close connection between a deep understanding of the Holy Scriptures and purity of heart constitutes one of the leitmotifs of the entire patristic tradition. Beginning with Saints Justin the Martyr and the Philosopher and Irenaeus of Lyon, the requirement of turning back or converting to the Lord was expressed in recognizing in Jesus of Nazareth, who died and rose again, the One of whom the Law and the Prophets spoke. The account of the risen Jesus appearing to the disciples on the road to Emmaus (*Luke* 24) and the conversion of Saint Paul on the road to Damascus (*Acts* 9; 22 and 26) can be considered “typical” references to “conversion to the Lord” (*conversio ad Dominum*), which opens the door to a new reinterpretation of the Old Testament texts.

“For even to this day,” says St. Basil the Great, “the same veil remains unlifted when the Old Testament is read, and it is only in Christ that it is removed. But when someone turns to the Lord (*conversio ad Dominum*), the veil is removed for him. And the Lord is the Spirit (*2 Cor* 3:14 and 16–17). What does this mean? That the one who dwells on the ordinary meaning of the letter (OT) and concerns himself with legal provisions is like a man who has covered his heart with a veil. He suffers this because he does not know that

¹⁴ Origen, “Homilies on the Book of Exodus,” *Homily* XII, 1. in idem, *Selected Writings. Part One. From the Exegetical Works on the Old Testament*, trans. Fr. Prof. T. Bodogae, N. Neaga, Z. Lațcu, in *PSB* 6 (Bucharest: EIBMBOR, 1981), 115.

with the coming of Christ, the literal observance of the Law was abrogated, that the types have become reality. Lamps fade in the presence of the sun; likewise, the law ceases and prophecies fall silent when the Truth is revealed. He who has succeeded in penetrating the depths of the Law and, by removing its obscurity as if it were a veil, has reached its mysteries, has imitated Moses, who, while speaking with God, removed his veil (*Exodus* 34:34)—and has moved from the letter to the Spirit. Thus, the veil over Moses' face corresponds to the obscurity of the law's prescriptions, and the return to the Lord (*conversio ad Dominum*) corresponds to spiritual contemplation.”¹⁵ For some early Church Fathers and writers, such as St. Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, and St. Gregory of Nazianzus, “turning to the Lord” could also signify a new or reinterpreted reading of texts transmitted from classical Greek antiquity. “The return to the Lord” (*conversio ad Dominum*) thus became the decisive key to interpreting both the texts of the Old Testament and the poems of the poets and philosophers recognized by the ancient pagan world. “The return to the Lord” obviously implied crossing the sea, symbolized by reliving this event through immersion in the waters of baptism. Baptistry became the portal of rebirth from above.

Divine Liturgy as a School of Spiritual Experience

The Liturgy has a mystagogical character such that it is not only *lex credendi* but also *lex vivendi*, for it is the natural place where one abides (*proskartereo*) in the teaching of the apostles, or in the *diakonia of the Word*, in the breaking of bread, in prayer, and in *koinonia* (cf. Acts 2:42). In harmony with the whole of biblical theology, especially that of Paul, the whole of human life is a Paschal liturgy, a liturgy that bestows new life upon Christians called to holiness, through participation in the celebration of the Paschal mystery throughout their earthly life, through the liturgical year, weeks, and days. The Paschal Mystery characterizes the “Day of the Lord,” which offers us the opportunity to live according to the rhythm of the Lord's death and resurrection. The

¹⁵ St. Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit*, trans. Prof. Constantin Cornițescu (Bucharest, 1988), 67–8.

celebration of the day “in which our life also dawned, through Him (Christ) and through His death” becomes the daily rhythm, making every day the Lord’s Passover and an unceasing feast. Such a process of spiritualizing life is the result of liturgical worship, positing a continuity between the liturgy and life in a dynamic of mutual influence. The mysteries of the faith and their understanding lie at the foundation of Christian life in its practical dimension. Direct contact with Scripture posits and grounds the newness of life in Christ as participation in the life of the Holy Trinity. The foundations are, in fact, the reality of the Christian’s divine filiation, who through baptism acquires “adoption” (*hyiothesia*) and is united with Christ, after which the Christian shapes his life according to the law of the Spirit that is within him as a principle of life and action. Thus, the call to holiness is born through the work of the Spirit in obedience to the Father and the Son.

The Patristic period constitutes a golden age in which liturgical spirituality was one and the same with Christian spirituality: *sic et simpliciter*! Christian life was centered on the liturgy and on mystagogical initiation into liturgical life. Through the sacramental celebration and the celebration of the Resurrection every Sunday, Christ’s Pascha becomes the rule that sets the rhythm of the Christian liturgical year. It becomes the novitiate of learning death and resurrection as the normative framework of moral life, which expresses through its acts the baptismal and sacramental life. This law of kenosis and life constitutes the continuity between liturgical life and the daily existence of the faithful. Participation in sacramental life provides the Christian with the moral program of his existence, so that spiritual life is founded on sacramental life and culminates in self-sacrifice through confession and martyrdom.

The Christian Presence in the World and in History

In the Epistle to Diognetus, the Christian mystery is evoked and the paradoxical condition of the believer is analyzed: Aware that “time is short” (cf. *1 Corinthians* 7:29) and that this world is passing away (cf. *1 Corinthians* 7:31), the Christian must live the

paradox of Christian existence: “to be in the world, without being of the world” (cf. *John* 17:11–16).

In this regard, Saint Paul states: “Our citizenship (τὸ πολίτευμα) is in heaven” (v. 20). The term τὸ πολίτευμα is a New Testament *hapax legomenon* and denotes the result or dynamic of the action expressed by the verb πολιτεύομαι used in 1:27, namely “political activity.” Five meanings of the term are proposed for the text in 3:20: “citizenship,” “city,” “homeland,” “state,” and “constitution.” The last meaning is also the most common in the Hellenistic period; in our context, it indicates the model and power that govern the earthly life of believers. Such a reality is found in heaven and is closely linked to the activity of the risen Christ. As a citizen of heaven, the Christian lives on earth in the condition and state of a traveler (*status viatoris* or *homo viator*), and the “constitution” governing his way of life is in heaven; therefore, here on earth, he feels like a stranger and a pilgrim (cf. *1 Peter* 1:1; 1:17; 2:11).

Christian life, existence in this world, is a pilgrimage, παροιμία (cf. *1 Peter* 1:17: “residence in a foreign land,” “temporary dwelling as a stranger”); the existence of the Church, consequently, is that of a people of God who dwell temporarily in a foreign land, far from their own home. Thus, the Church is a pilgrim on earth; its citizenship is only in heaven, where Christians “are no longer strangers and sojourners (ξένοι καὶ πάροικοι), but fellow citizens with the saints and members of God’s household (συμπολῖται τῶν ἁγίων καὶ οἰκεῖοι τοῦ θεοῦ: cf. *Ephesians* 2:19)”; in other words, they cannot have any other homeland besides the Kingdom of God!

This is not an invitation to escape from history to disengagement and indifference toward the problems of human life or of the “city”—*the polis*. The Christian lives among people, in solidarity with them, yet without conforming to the dominant ideology and without submitting to the idols of this world. He must know that historical time, the time of his *paroikia*, is an exodus, a departure from this world to the Father (cf. *John* 13:1), and that here on earth he has no permanent city but is constantly seeking the one to come (cf. *Hebrews* 13:14). The best illustration of this reality is the passage from the Epistle to Diognetus, in which the verb πολιτεύομαι appears, an eloquent testimony to the self-

awareness of the early Christians: “Christians live in the countries where they were born, but as strangers (πάροικοι); they take part in everything as citizens, but endure everything as strangers; every foreign land is their homeland, and every homeland is a foreign land to them... They dwell on earth but are citizens of heaven (πολιτεύονται)” (*Epistle to Diognetus*, V, 9). And he adds the famous statement about Christians as the soul of the world: “To put it briefly: what the soul is to the body, that is what Christians are to the world. The soul is spread throughout all the members of the body, and Christians throughout all the cities of the world. The soul dwells in the body but is not of the body; Christians dwell in the world but are not of the world (*John* 17:11–16). The unseen soul is enclosed within the visible body, and Christians are visible because they are in the world, but their faith in God remains unseen. The body hates the soul and wages war against it (*Gal* 5:17), without having done it any harm, because it prevents it from indulging in pleasures; and the world hates Christians, without having done them any harm, because they resist its pleasures. The soul loves the body, even though the body hates the soul; the soul also loves the members, and Christians love their enemies. The soul is imprisoned in the body, yet it sustains the body; and Christians are imprisoned in the world, as in a prison, yet they sustain the world. The immortal soul dwells in a mortal tent, and Christians dwell temporarily in perishable things but await incorruptibility in heaven. The soul, tormented by little food and drink, becomes better; and Christians, punished every day, multiply all the more. God has placed them in such a great multitude that they are not permitted to leave it (chapter VI, 1–10).”

“The separation and presence of Christians in the world” thus define the paradox of the Gospel. The person touched by the “Gospel of grace” (cf. Acts 20:24) becomes a “sent one—an apostle” (*John* 17:18) in the world to bear witness. Presence in the world, however, will always be balanced by a separation from this world. This is also the significance of the birth of monasticism in the East in the 4th century AD. They fled to the desert to better discover God and serve people. In the wilderness (*midbar*), God revealed Himself to humanity as an existence in a relationship of communion and love; and therefore, to recover the inner dimension of listening to

and hearing the revealed word—*dabar*—humanity must withdraw from time to time to a deserted place (ἐρημὸς τόπος; *eremos topos*), just as the Savior did (*Matthew* 14:15).

It is not a matter of seeking individual perfection, but of returning to the Gospel ideal as lived by the early Church, the Mother Church of Jerusalem (cf. Acts 2–4). From an eschatological perspective, the spread of monasticism reminds us that the Kingdom of God can also be anticipated through charismatic, socially organized communities of faith within a specific time and space.

An Ecclesial and Radical Spirituality

Against any Gnostic or aristocratic temptations, the spirituality of the Fathers opposes any form of sectarianism or spiritual aristocracy. Through its kerygmatic character and the forms it takes, it is a spirituality for the Christian life that excludes no one. For the Church Fathers, as for the experience that emerges from the New Testament, there is only one spirituality: the fulfillment of the promises made at baptism in their entirety. The Christian experience does not conceive of part-time Christians! Jesus' exhortation "Be perfect" (*Matthew* 5:48) is addressed to all Christians and implies an eschatological tension. All are invited to live a life of holiness, whether married or not. St. Basil the Great goes so far as to affirm that "the Christian life is monotropic (it has but one direction), having as its sole goal the glory of God."¹⁶ While this was natural during the period of persecution, when "living as true Christians" entailed the supreme witness of sacrificing one's life, once the storm of persecution had passed, the Christian ideal was not mediocrity. With the spread of monasticism and the ideal of virginity or chastity, Christian spirituality did not split into two: one for the solitary and one for the rest, with a basic morality. In their baptismal and sacramental catechesis, in their homilies, they united three dimensions—doctrinal, moral, and liturgical—in a convergence designed to predispose the catechumens to adopt a new way of life. Augustine asked himself: "What good are my discourses

¹⁶ St. Basil the Great, *Regulae fusius tractatae*, 20, 2.

to me? Why am I there, seated at my pulpit? What good is my life to me? The sole purpose is that we may ultimately come to live with Christ” (*Serm 17, 2*). This is *the Life in Christ*, also proposed by Saint Nicholas Cabasilas in the Byzantine Middle Ages.

The Third Generation

New Testament spirituality, that of the first generations of believers, used the expression “the third race” (Gr. *triton genus*; Lat. *tertium genus*) to define Christian identity. The culture to which this refers is the biblical one, which reminds Christians of the new life they enjoy through their participation in the body of Christ, glorified by the resurrection (cf. *1 Cor* 12:13; *2 Cor* 5:17). Thus arose *the genus electum* (“the chosen race”; cf. *1 Peter* 2:9), in which there are no differences that separate (*Gal* 3:28). On the contrary, Christians constitute a new people, or the inclusive new humanity, in the face of the social discriminations and divisions of the world and the era of that time (Jews and Greeks; cf. *Ephesians* 4:24). Educated in the spirit of this faith, Christians did not consider themselves a *haireseis ton ioudaion* (alongside the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes...) or some philosophical *sect*, but an anthropological novelty. The Christian faith and the Christian life that flows from it are based on a new birth (*palingeneia*), which brings about a new life, in which both Jews and Greeks can share. It suffices to quote Diognetus again: “Why has this new race of people or this new way of life appeared in the world now, and not before?” The new way of life, of living as a Christian, is an absolute novelty that distinguishes it from Hellenism and Judaism.

Eschatological Orientation

The expectation of the Lord profoundly marked the spirituality of the early Church and of the Fathers of the post-apostolic period. “Every day and every hour, watch and be ready to do what is pleasing to the Lord, knowing that the Lord will come at the hour when you least expect it” (*St. Basil the Great*). Biblical and patristic spirituality is eschatological. From St. Paul to St. Ignatius of Antioch or St. John Climacus, Christians—whether monastics or

engaged in the world in “awaiting and hastening the coming of the Day of the Lord” (cf. 2 *Peter* 3:12)—have aspired to the encounter with God. If for the sages of antiquity life on earth was a *preparatio mortis*, for the Church Fathers the remembrance of death and the thought of one’s own end was transfigured both in the realm of personal asceticism and of liturgical synaxis into the mystery of supreme communion with “the Firstborn from the dead” (cf. *Colossians* 1:18), Jesus Christ the risen Lord.

The Spiritual Model

The Virgin Mary’s reaction, according to the evangelist Luke, was regarded by the Church Fathers as an exemplary attitude of profound stillness: “she kept all these things, pondering them in her heart” (*Luke* 2:19 and 51). She is characterized by Saint Luke using two verbs: *syntērēō* “to keep, to guard” and *sybállō* “to bring two parts together, to unite, to evaluate, to interpret, to meditate.” The Virgin Mary pondered all these events (Gr. *rhēmata*), especially the Good News brought by the angel, and sought to decipher their meaning. She became a model for all believers because she did not immediately understand God’s plan for her; therefore, she first had to understand and interpret it. *Mariām sybállousa en tē kardía autēs* refers to the clear and correct interpretation of divine intervention. The Virgin Mary, therefore, understands what she has heard and seen. Just as the verb *gnōrízō*, “to make known, to reveal,” in *Luke* 2:15 does not refer to a mere transmission of information, *sybállousa* does not indicate merely a logical and intellectual evaluation of the facts. The Virgin Mary does not interpret only with her mind (*noūs*), but with her whole will and affectivity: in her heart.

The Evangelist Luke notes for the second time that Mary “treasured all these things in her heart” (*Luke* 2:51); not merely remembering them but also pondering them (cf. v. 19). The contemplation and internalization of the words and events (Gr. *rhēmata*) through which Christ the Savior enlightens and guides her, progressively opening her mind to the understanding of faith, as one who was the first among humans to believe (*Luke* 1:45).

Mary's spiritual model is very well highlighted by Origen in *his Commentary on the Gospel of John*: "Of all the Holy Scriptures, the Gospels are the first fruits, and among the Gospels, the first fruit of the first fruits is the Gospel of John... No one can understand it (a Gospel shrouded in mystery) ... no one can explain its meaning except the one who leaned on Jesus' chest and received Mary as his mother from Him." And he goes on to explain that since Mary has only one Son, Jesus, the disciple receives Mary as his own mother if he becomes, like John, an *alter Christus*, if Jesus Christ lives in him (*Galatians* 2:20). And because Christ lives in him, when he speaks to the Virgin Mary about him, he says to her: "Behold your son."¹⁷ Being like Christ and being the son of Mary are experiences that come together in the life of the spiritual person.

Christianity, the Way of Faith par excellence

Jesus Christ—the Lord—reveals Himself to humanity as "the Way, the Truth, and the Life" (*John* 14:6). It is significant that in both the Holy Gospels and the Book of Acts, the theme of "the Way" and the importance of "the journey" hold special significance. The expressions "The Way," "The Way of the Word," and "The Way of Salvation" constitute the central theme of Christian spirituality. We see in the Holy Gospels that all the persons present in the narrative descriptions are on the Way: from the Virgin Mary, who set out on a journey to a town in Judea (Lk 1:39), to Saint John the Baptist, who was preparing "the way of the Lord" (Lk 3:4–5), to Jesus Himself, who from the beginning "went about" (cf. Lk 4:30), and later, at decisive moments (Lk 9:51–57, etc.), was on the way to Jerusalem. And after His Resurrection, the journey continues (cf. Lk 24:32), so that the first Christians in the apostolic community used the metaphor of "the way" to define themselves.

Significantly, in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus' ministry is concentrated in a single journey from Galilee to Jerusalem, which Luke presents in a new form compared to Mark. After Jesus had completed his ministry in Galilee (Nazareth, Capernaum, Nain), in the Sea of Galilee (Gerasa), he decided to set out for Jerusalem (cf.

¹⁷ Origen, *In Joannem*, I, 6, 23: *Commento al Vangelo di Giovanni*, ed. E. Corsini (1968), 123.

Lk 9:51–Lk 19:28). Jerusalem in Luke’s Gospel is consistently mentioned as the destination of the pilgrimage (cf. Lk 13:22; 17:11; 19:11). Within the geographical framework of St. Luke’s work, Jerusalem occupies a central place, since Jesus’ journey is directed toward the Holy City, and in the Acts of the Apostles, the apostles’ preaching begins in Jerusalem after the Descent of the Holy Spirit.

Luke uses the term “The Way” (*ἡ ὁδὸς*) on several occasions to refer to Christians and the Christian life. Both the Christian community and the profession of faith are designated by the term *ἡ ὁδὸς* (“The Way”). This is therefore the established term by which the early generations of Christians referred to the Church or their gathering together in the name of Jesus Christ. In Acts 9:2, Saul asks for permission to bring in chains “those who are on the Way” (*τῆς ὁδοῦ ὄντας*, that is, followers of Christianity or of the Way). This designation of believers in Christ is also evident in other texts, such as Acts 19:9 and 23; 22:4; 24:14 and 22. In Acts 22:4, Saint Paul presents himself as a persecutor: “I persecuted this Way (*ταύτην τὴν ὁδὸν*) to the point of death, binding and imprisoning both men and women,” and in an apologetic speech delivered before the Jews. “The Way” is presented in this context without further specification. In another apologetic speech, delivered before the procurator Felix (Acts 24:1–21), Saint Paul likewise testifies that he worships the God of his fathers “according to the Way which they call a sect” (*κατὰ τὴν ὁδὸν ἣν λέγουσιν αἵρεσιν*; Acts 24:14). The two terms used as “names given” to the disciples and the church in the Acts of the Apostles are “heresy” (*αἵρεσιν*) by opponents, and “Way” (*τὴν ὁδὸν*) by supporters. “Those who belong to the Way” are, according to Saint Luke, those who believe in the risen Jesus Christ (while the name “Christians” is a name given by those outside the church: cf. Acts 11:26).

While the Greek term *αἵρεσις* is, as the translation shows, the etymological origin of the word “heresy,” which, in patristic usage, gradually came to be distinguished from “sect,” being defined as “a false doctrine,” rather than as “schism,” in the New Testament it did not strictly speaking refer to a doctrinal error, but to a “*choice, differing opinion, school of thought, religious-spiritual movement.*” In the context of the Book of Acts, it is used for the Jewish groups of the Sadducees (Acts 5:17) and the Pharisees (Acts 15:5), perhaps

even as “the most rigorous school” among the latter (Acts 26:5); the Essenes are not identified as such in the New Testament, although the question of John the Baptist’s connection to the Essene sect has become a subject of great interest to recent New Testament scholars. When Paul was attacked: “this man is a plague and a stirrer of sedition among all the Jews of the world, being the ringleader of the Nazarene heresy (πρωτοστάτην τε τῆς τῶν Ναζωραίων αἰρέσεως) (Acts 24:5), this may represent a designation that places the “sect of the Nazarenes” alongside the Sadducees and the Pharisees (and the Essenes) in the taxonomy of Jewish movements contemporary to the birth of Christianity.

Concluding Remarks

The most intriguing term used in the New Testament, and especially in the Book of Acts, is the name given to Jesus’ disciples: “The Way” (ἡ ὁδός). In addition to Acts 24:14, already cited, it appears in the following passages: before his conversion, Saul asks the Jewish high priest for letters (cf. Acts 23:25), so that “if he should find any there, both men and women, who were following this Way, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem” (Acts 9:2); after his conversion, Paul had to deal with those who “were obstinate and unbelieving, speaking evil of the Way of the Lord before the crowd” (Acts 19:9); in Ephesus, “there was a great uproar over the Way of the Lord (περὶ τῆς ὁδοῦ),” leading to a revolt by the craftsmen (Acts 19:23); speaking “in the Jewish language,” that is, in Aramaic, Paul confesses to his Jewish listeners that before his conversion “I persecuted this Way to the point of death” (Acts 22:4); and Felix, the governor, was “well acquainted with the matters concerning the Way” (τὰ περὶ τῆς ὁδοῦ; Acts 24:22). In none of these passages is there any attempt to define “the Way” or to specify its content; it is taken at face value, on the assumption that readers could understand its meaning. The closest definition of it in early Christian literature does not appear at all in the New Testament, but in the contrast at the beginning of the Didache, which sounds like an already existing topos: “There are two ways, one of life and one of death, and there is a great difference between the two ways.”

Furthermore, due to the roots of this opposition in biblical usage—with phrases such as “the way of the wicked” (Ps 1:1 LXX), “the way of truth” (Wis 5:6 LXX), “the way of the Lord” (Wis 5:7 LXX), or “I am the Way” (*John* 14:6)—“The Way” continued to be used to designate the faith and those who adhered to it. “The Way” defines, therefore, primarily “the Way of salvation,” as recalled by the spirit-possessed servant girl who followed Paul and cried out, “These men are servants of the Highest God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation (ὁδὸν σωτηρίας: Acts 16:17).”

However, the Latin term *Christianus* / Χριστιανός (Acts 11:26), first applied to the “heresy of the Nazarenes” (αἵρεσις τῶν Ναζωραίων) and to “the Way” (ἡ ὁδός) in Antioch by his opponents, is the one that remained as the popular designation, becoming in all languages the primary identifying mark of the disciples and the church in every historical period. The Greek suffix *-ianos*—designates the believers as “those who belong to Christ” (Christians), just as one spoke of Caesarians, Herodians, or Essenes. From the moment that both Jewish converts and non-Jews became part of the Christian community, it was recognized as a distinct religious entity. In other words, its universality is recognized as a characteristic of the new faith.

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