



THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE EXPERIENCE OF GOD - ONE WORLD TO ANOTHER

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In a world not only of inequality but one that is armed and tense, where distrust and suspicion of others grow, to refer to the experience of God involves deepening our understanding that we do not belong to ourselves, but that all identity - be it personal, community, national, or religious- is received. We do not have the source of being within us but rather we are receptacles of a life given to us. To forget that we are recipients leads to arrogant possessiveness and, in turn, to violence.

Different religious traditions express and celebrate this sense of belonging in various ways, and call for detachment from one's own being so that human life may become gift. As members of consecrated life at the core of the Christian tradition we wish to bear witness to a way of being and of living: being in and for the world as a sign that we do not receive life from ourselves but from the One who helps us detach ourselves from our own self ownership. We do this by means of the vows: detachment from things by means of poverty, non-possessiveness of persons by means of chastity, and detachment from our own will by the voluntary exercise of our freedom carried out in obedience.

This self-detachment that comes from the awareness that we receive our being from THE ONE whose very essence is Giving, returns innocence to our relationships with things, the world, and persons. It is a blessed simplicity, a second innocence that can make possible a different world. The experience of God, renewed and continually deepened, restores this primordial innocence

because it deactivates egocentric impulses, be they personal or communitarian, political or religious.

Today we can no longer limit ourselves to a specific experience of God applicable only to our group or our tradition. It is true that when we live deeply the essence of our own tradition we will reach the core of others because all religions are imbued by One unique Mystery: the awareness, gratitude, and celebration that life is gift and giving. But, at the same time, in order for the world to change, we have to not only open up our experience of God but also our concept of God.

If our sights are set on the whole world, we will need to cultivate an experience of God that is broader and more inclusive. The spiritual experience that can transform the world is one that, belonging to each tradition, is interdenominational and trans-denominational. Because of this I will introduce an experience that is universally human: breathing. All human beings, all living things as well, breathe. The mystery of life is contained in breathing: receiving and handing over, taking in and offering back. This rhythm is a reflection and a participation in what happens at the core of the Trinitarian relationships: The Son receives himself from the Father at the same time he gives himself back to the Father. The Son is the breath of the Father exhaled into the world, and we become Sons and Daughters to the measure that we receive him and unite ourselves to this movement of self-giving. Thus, breathing, being profoundly Christian, is also universal because it touches the essence of our condition as created beings. Only when we feel ourselves to be creatures do we reestablish a just order with the human community and with the world. All believers of all traditions share the common experience of breathing. After all, what does it mean to be a believer if not to believe one has received one's own existence, one's being, from an Other, and transform this existence into a gift of self that does not consider this self as an object of possession but rather as a gift given? And in breathing we also encounter the so called nonbeliever, because they also make an act of faith every time they breathe, opening to that which is beyond them.

We can breakdown breathing into four moments.

1. Inhaling

- 1.1 Inhaling implies taking in and recognizing our need of the Other, of others and of things. It involves a confession of our own indigence and of our own mortality. Each inhalation implies an act of humility and an act of faith. Of humility, because we recognize ourselves to be lacking and in need; of faith, because we entrust ourselves to what we are about to receive. Breathing, we take in and taking in, we open ourselves. To

open is to declare a primordial yes to the gift of life that comes to us through each person and event, it presupposes making ourselves available to receive Life, and with it, the Lord of life. It's about reaching an attitude of active passivity: it is action because no one can do it for us, but it is passive because it happens in us. The experience of Faith is also like that: we profess it freely, as an inalienable responsibility, but what we receive from it is much greater than what we realize. In a culture dedicated to "doing" where one's worth is measured in terms of gains and successes, the very act of recognizing that we receive more than we give is already an experience of God because it opens us to gratitude and respect in the presence of Mystery.

Receiving is in contrast to separating and rejecting. When we choose and select, we exclude and discriminate. Inhaling implies cultivating an innocent gaze, attentive, transparent. "All is revelation, all is about accepting things in their nascent state" said Maria Zambrano¹

It is to inhale the whole of a reality, to allow it to enter the pores of our being, to expose ourselves to it, to allow it to strip and disarm us.

Receiving is also in contrast to demanding. The person, whose life is rooted in the awareness that she does not receive herself from herself, cannot be demanding. She perceives existence as a continual gift, and that makes her grateful. At the same time, to the measure that one lives rooted in the awareness that all is gift, one becomes incapable of destruction. There is nothing further from the experience of God than to demand and to grab. This experience and awareness is critical to our being able to stop preying on each other and to freeing the planet from the pillaging and plunder to which we submit it with our zeal and anxiety.

If we do not want to demolish each other on the basis of rights and obligations, the civilized code that conceals how we ignore the gift of life, we must act out of the awareness of life as Gift.

- 1.2 Applied to an inter-religious context, to inhale means to recognize that there is inspiration in other traditions. This implies opening oneself to that which nurtures: to their sacred texts, to their symbols and celebrations, to their values ... and this, in turn, implies taking interest in them, venerating them as sources of inspiration and transformation for their followers. How can we respect other religious traditions if we do not know what inspires them? To breathe (*inspirar*) with them means knowing their Scriptures, reading them with respect and studying them with the awareness of being on sacred ground. Who among us has read the Koran, the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita or a Buddhist sutra? This

is not a trite question. What would we say to someone who told us that they know us and respect us but have not read even a page of the Gospel? How would they recognize Jesus if they do not know founding texts that speak of Him and that nurture us as Christians? This approach is yet to be made. Yet today it is possible to carry it out because in all libraries around the world you can access the great texts of the major religious traditions. A sign of globalization is the awareness of the diverse traditions of wisdom and holiness that we cannot neglect, and for which we must give thanks and welcome, belong not just to the denominations from which they originate but are part of our shared human patrimony. We will need mystagogues to introduce us to the texts, but there is no doubt that our community liturgies have a lot of ground to cover in regard to this.

- 1.3 Thirdly, to inspire (inhale) involves conspiring (to co-inspire). Is this perchance not what all believers on Earth are called to do? And when I speak of believers, I do not think only of those who explicitly identify themselves with or are adherents to one of the major religious traditions, but of every human being who transcends him or herself in an act of contemplation and of devotion (outpouring) to others in recognition of the gift of life they receive. Today we cannot breathe without co-inspiring, because we need each other. As consecrated persons, we are called to go into the desert, that is, to the limit of our religious territory and to heed the energy and wisdom of other methods and approaches. As Christians we confess that the mystery of God is revealed in the holiness of our brother or sister, but from other traditions we can be enriched by the emphasis on their encounters with the sacred in ways we might otherwise overlook: mother earth, the present moment, ethical action, beauty,... Our faith proclaims the incarnation of God which makes possible our opening to all that is human, to the point of being able to say “nothing human is foreign to us”. Being that we feel that nothing is foreign to us we can discover the authenticity of the experience of God. As Simone Weil said, “To know that a person has truly experienced God I do not focus on how he or she speaks of God but rather of others”.

2. Interiorizing

Once you inhale air you have to know how to hold it for awhile in your lungs, while it runs through your whole body oxygenating every cell.

- 2.1 The experience of God the world needs today requires times of assimilation and interiorization. Possibly, this is needed more now than ever given

the extroversion we are all forced to live today. I am not going to demonize this extroversion because it is also a source of extraordinary creativity. We are, we move and we exist thanks to it and to the scientific and technological advances it has made possible. Thanks to it, we are all here today since we have all come by metro, bus, car, train or plane. But this same progress has become devouring and devastating. It is not about stopping what we are doing, but rather about behaving in another way. “My Father works and I also work”, says Jesus (Jn 5,17). How does the Father work? How does Jesus work? Without agitation or intensity, attentive to what people and things are, listening to their internal heartbeat and yearnings. Because the God outside, the totally Other, is also the God inside, there is a sameness of same things. To experience that, one must be truly centered. We, on the contrary, live crazy lives, literally dislocated from our axis. Interiorizing is what allows us to create a space between ourselves and things, between ourselves and others. It is akin to what the Gospels say of Mary, “that she kept these things in her heart” (Lk 2, 29.51). To keep in your heart: that is the task of interiorization, its active passivity.

- 2.2 On this point we are called to be as radical as we are bold and creative. It is one of the most fundamental dimensions we can contribute as believers, and even more so as consecrated to God, the Absolute. Another quality, not just about work but about being, emerges in persons who pray, in persons who cultivate interiority. Here is where the term *con-sagrare* acquires a particular resonance: “to makes oneself one with the sacred”. “Sacred” is that which “confers reality on things”.² The sacred, then, is not something separate from the world, but its very nucleus, the marrow at the core of the real. In all religious traditions there exists the call to radicality of adoration and of contemplation which cannot be substituted by any other activity. This requires that we make it a priority in our day, choices of activities, and decisions.

At the beginning of the Gospel of Mark (1,21-39) we are presented with twenty-four hours of Jesus’ life where the difference between his activity and that of Peter’s is made clear precisely by the place of prayer in Jesus’ choices in contrast to Peter’s. Jesus has had a very active day: in the morning he preaches in the synagogue and he heals someone who was possessed; mid-day he is invited to Peter’s house where he heals Peter’s mother-in-law and where we can imagine his playing with the children of the family, as well as discussing the situation in Israel in face of Roman domination and other religious questions that concerned his recently chosen disciples; later he spends the rest of the afternoon healing a long line of the sick that have sought him out. And then, the

gospel says, “early in the morning, when it was still dark, he withdrew to a very solitary place to pray” (Mk 1,35). Jesus’ activity and mission is inconceivable without this time of prayer and interiority. Jesus knows that he can do nothing of himself without first having seen it done by the Father (Jn 5,19). And where does he come to see this if not during these times of contemplation, times when he enters into his own depth, and enters into the abyss of God? That is where he receives light, confirmation, anointing and clarity. Thus we can understand the reply he gives to Peter when he interrupts Jesus’ prayer, pleading, agitatedly insisting that Jesus return to the house right away because everyone is looking for him to heal them. Jesus responds peacefully that he is not going to do that, instead he is going to go on his way to other towns to announce the Kingdom. The freedom that Jesus has, by which he neither creates dependencies nor becomes dependent, flows from his prayer, from his capacity for internalizing events and situations that he lives, re-reading them from another depth. Peter, on the other hand, because he does not give himself this space, is trapped in the immediacy of the situation, without any perspective.

- 2.3 Every religious tradition cultivates this interiority in its own way. A very simple way is what our Moslem brothers practice: They stop five times a day to remember that, above all activity, no matter how urgent or important they may be, there is God, the Absolute. Just as we said above, that we are called to know the sacred texts that inspire other traditions, we are also called to get to know their different techniques and paths to interiority. To come to know is not to peck at. However, to get to know we will have to try it out. Although all try to open up the human capacity for silence and adoration, the supports they use vary. The West has mostly developed the word. But there are many more registers to explore: physical posture, breathing, dance, movement (*tai chi, chi Qung, ...*), vehicles of integration as well as internalization. This is not about a style but rather a *kairos*, although it is true that it can become boring. The difference between styles and *kairos* is that the former only entertains, while the *kairos* offers the opportunity to grow.

The experience of God introduces into the world of immediacy the depth of silence. I am convinced that this is one of the most important contributions that religious traditions can offer our contemporaries, and all the more so for us, as men and women consecrated to the Absolute, striving to deepen our awareness, to be more serene, more accustomed to the free, unwarranted gift of encounter and to the quality of that moment.

3 Exhaling

The air that we inhale, internalize, has to be exhaled. It cannot remain in the lungs. Just as it gives us life it kills us if we do not let it go. We attach and detach. Exhaling involves the exercise of self-emptying, letting go of the self.

- 3.1 It is the moment of self surrender. In a good breath, exhaling takes twice the time of inhaling. All that we have and we are is to be offered. It is a freely given pouring out of self, a self surrender. Here again we see the prophetic nature of this movement. Trained by our culture to consume and devour, we do not know how to let go and share. Interiority and solidarity go hand in hand. They are the systol and the dyastol of the same movement. The experience of God leads to self outpouring because God, God's self, is the self surrendered. The world exists as God's self outpouring into form. The fullness of God is shown in the fullness of allowing to be. This movement of allowing to be, of helping other beings and things to be, and to be themselves, is an experience of God, because it participates in God's creative and inspiring power.
- 3.2 The self outpouring, the exhalation that is the experience of God, is not found apart from other types of self-surrender, but along with them. The self-gift that flows from a profound and expansive experience of God does not stand in judgment of other ways persons give themselves, but rather rejoices with them. I refer to the generosity expressed in alternative platforms that emerge outside political and religious institutions, like the Porto Alegre Forum and other initiatives in which we are not present. This self outpouring enables us not only to give ourselves more fully but to discover where there are elements of life that are not a constitutive part of our own core of being. Therefore, the experience of God involves an ideological disarming. The shortcomings of an ideology or an experience of God which has become an ideology lie in its incapacity to move outside its own definitions in its attempt to block recognition and acceptance of that which goes beyond them. Self surrender, self-outpouring, involves de-absolutizing one's own self gift.
- 3.3 The forms of self outpouring can differ in emphasis. To simplify, there are two:

the prophetic and the sapiential. I say sapiential and not mystical because I understand the prophetic is also mystical albeit characteristically more brusque in style. It expresses itself with the announcement which denounces. That another world is possible is stated forcefully, with urgency, even with indignation, in the name of so much pain that has

been silenced and ignored. The world has need of this prophetic disposition. But there also exists a sapiential tone that flows out of a silent gaze that in the face of pain does not lead to rebellion but rather reverence. It is a serene, deep, infinitely patient gaze that knows how to read the other side of things. Clamor and silence are both part of being in the world in which we pour out ourselves, exhaling slowly and serenely, confidently, without anxiety nor rush, even though the world in which we live may need urgent change. The following profession of Buddhist principles expressed by the Peacemaker Order is a valuable testament to this second type of emphasis which is part of the so called “current of committed spirituality”:

“I vow to consciously follow the principle of “not knowing”, aware of the ignorance of Absolute Reality that my limited vision has, renouncing all fixed ideas about myself, others and the universe.

I vow to bear witness to the joy and the suffering of the world.

I vow to heal myself and others.

Aware of the interdependence of the One and the Other I commit myself to the following spiritual practices:

To recognize that I am not apart from the whole.

To be satisfied with what I have.

To deal with all of creation with respect and dignity.

To listen and speak from the heart.

To cultivate a mind that sees with clarity.

To accept unconditionally what each moment offers me.

To express what I perceive to be true without blame or blaming.

To use all elements of my life.

To transform suffering into wisdom.

To honor my life as an instrument of peace.

In face of such texts, one can do nothing but rejoice in having such companions in the journey, although we may not agree in the names we use for the Ultimate Reality or Being that impels us.

4. To remain in the emptiness

- 4.1 We human beings fear emptiness because we experience ourselves as deficient and in need. Our anxieties and aggression come from our inability to confront our deficiency and nothingness (emptiness). Nevertheless, men and women of God seek this stripping. “Rejoice, Mary, full of grace”. Mary was full of grace because she was empty of

herself. The experience of God leads to this stripping that goes beyond commitment (Self-outpouring). In the outpouring of self we are still in control; in the stripping we are no longer. It lies within God's sphere, there where we are out of our depth. In the words of Meister Eckhart:

When material fire kindles wood, a spark receives the nature of fire, and it becomes like pure fire (...). When fire works, and kindles wood and sets it on fire, the fire diminishes the wood and makes it unlike itself, taking away its coarseness, coldness, heaviness and dampness, and turns the wood into itself, into fire, more and more like to it. But neither the fire nor the wood is pacified or quieted or satisfied with any warmth or heat or likeness until the fire gives birth to itself in the wood, and gives to the wood its own nature and also its own being, so that they both become one and the same unseparated fire, neither less nor more. And therefore, before this may be achieved, there is always smoke, contention, crackling, effort and violence between fire and wood. But when all the unlikeness has been taken away and rejected, then the fire is stilled and the wood is quiet.³

For the nature of wood to become like that of fire it must consume its proper substance. This is the emptiness. Jesus' outpouring of himself culminates on the cross: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Self surrendering his spirit, he died, and at the same moment that he died, he resurrected, his spirit piercing through to the world. In the Gospel of John, Pentecost begins on the cross.

Jesus' self-emptying is the path to the resurrection. There is still so much in us, in our institutions and in our religious traditions to empty! We speak of maintaining our identities, and it is true, that needs to be done. But, the paradox is in the seed that only takes root if it dies. Our identities, congregational as well as ecclesiastic, national, political, denominational, are not fruitful as long as they are defensive (armored). Our identities do not belong to us, but rather, we are the reservoir into which they have been poured. They will only be fruitful when we offer them till the end, without doing so for any purpose of propaganda, but rather placing them at the service of others. The faith in Christ Jesus is not a boundary for Christianity, but rather the impetus to go beyond all boundaries, just as he pierced through the walls of Jerusalem. There, totally dumbfounded, speechless, is when one is most oneself, when one shows most clearly who he or she is: the Lord, emptied of every form of power.

- 4.2 It is thus that we reach the more radical dimension of detachment that we talked about at the beginning. While we are on the defensive, we are

also on the offensive, so there will not be any real encounter. To reveal God we need to be ready to lose ourselves, beyond the seal of our own religious group. This will lead us to what the mystics call the Cloud of Unknowing. In the quieting of the flame and the wood, words are also stilled. And in this silence of our speech, of our discussions, and of our ideas, all religious traditions, as well as agnostics, are called to encounter one another. All theology is, in the last analysis, apophatic. It is only thus that we stop talking about God and let God be the one to speak. This capacity for stillness reflects the authenticity of religious experience. Words belong to our sphere. All religious traditions are biased in speaking of God. That is why their end is to allow it to be God who speaks through them. And for this, they must be empty.

- 4.3 In this empty space the new can emerge with the silence of the old. Not because the old in itself distorts or impedes, but because we have been able to make things too much ours and it occupies a place that does not allow for the incorporation of what is yet to come. When the lungs have expelled all the air, they can once again breathe in pure air. The experience of God is characterized by this permanent novelty, by an irruption that displaces and surprises, like the apparitions of the resurrected Jesus. The Lord that has crossed over death reveals himself to his disciples beyond what was hoped for, to the point that it is difficult for them to recognize him. And when they do, he vanishes so they cannot hold onto him. Christ Resurrected and the Spirit that flies over the waters of the Earth and history since the origins of time continue to reveal themselves without our recognizing them, beyond the mental, symbolic, and religious parameters which we have set for them. But always, then as now, the signs that it is the Resurrected One that we have met are in the effects of the experience: in the bush that is aflame but does not burn (Ex 3,3-4; Ac2,3-4) and impels one to free a whole people, in the gentle breeze that brings serenity (1 K 19, 12-13) in the midst of persecution, in the peace that frees hearts from fear (Jn 20,19-20; Lc 24,36), in the more-than-abundant catch that does not tear the nets (Jn 21,11), in returning to the community with burning hearts (Lc 24,32), impelled to share the experience just received and to continue together the adventure of the shared mission.

If names and symbols had to be found to express the faith experience that broke all known molds of the tradition to which the founding accounts of our origin belong, today we find ourselves in a similar place that requires the same type of audacity, confidence and discernment. Having exhaled, a new air needs to come into the Church, in such a way that we can breathe together with other believers of the world and share

with them energizing symbols and metaphors.

5. Conclusions

Thus, we have moved through the four moments of the breathing cycle. As consecrated women and men, all we can do is qualitatively live each of these four moments to the fullest, that is, to face life with four attitudes: receiving, interiorizing, offering, and detachment to the point of total emptiness so that God can burst in anew. Live free and unfettered, predisposed to what may present itself: the challenge of a different world, in need of audacity as well as patience, of identities that are profound but not armored, of prophesy that cannot be corrupted as well as that of silence, capable of personally feeling the fate of 6 thousand million sisters and brothers, ready to inhale what every tradition breathes.

I want to conclude with a text prepared by different religious traditions for the IV Parliament of the Religions of the World (Barcelona 2004)

AN OFFER FOR THE WORLD

*We citizens of the world,
People on the journey, people who seek,
Heirs of the ancient traditions,
Want to proclaim:
That human life, of itself, is a wonder;
That Nature is our mother and our home,
And it is to be loved and preserved;
That peace needs to be built with a conscious effort
Upon justice, forgiveness and generosity;
That diversity of cultures
is a great wealth and not an obstacle;
that the world is a great treasure
if we can relate to it with profound respect;
and that the religions want to be paths to that depth;
that, in the quest, religions find strength and meaning
in openness to unbounded Mystery;
that forming community helps us in this experience;*

*that religions can be an access road to
interior peace, harmony with oneself, and with the world,
that translates into an admiring, joyful, and grateful gaze;
that we who belong to different religious traditions
want to dialog among ourselves;
that we want to share with everyone
the struggle to make a better world ,
to resolve the extreme problems of humanity:
hunger and poverty,
war and violence,
the destruction of the environment,
the lack of access to a meaningful quality of life,
the lack of respect for freedom and for difference;
and that we want to share with everyone
the fruits of our search
for the highest aspiration of the human being,
starting with the most radical respect for each person,
and with the purpose of together living
a life that is worth living.*

¹ *Claros del Bosque*, Seix Barral, Barcelona 1977, 1951

² Coming from the Indoeuropean root "sak", which means to "confer reality".

³ "The Book of Divine Consolation" in *Meister Eckhart, the Essential Sermons Commentaries, Treatises and Defense*, by Edmund Colledge, Bernard McGinn; Paulist Press, 1981, pp 221, 222.