

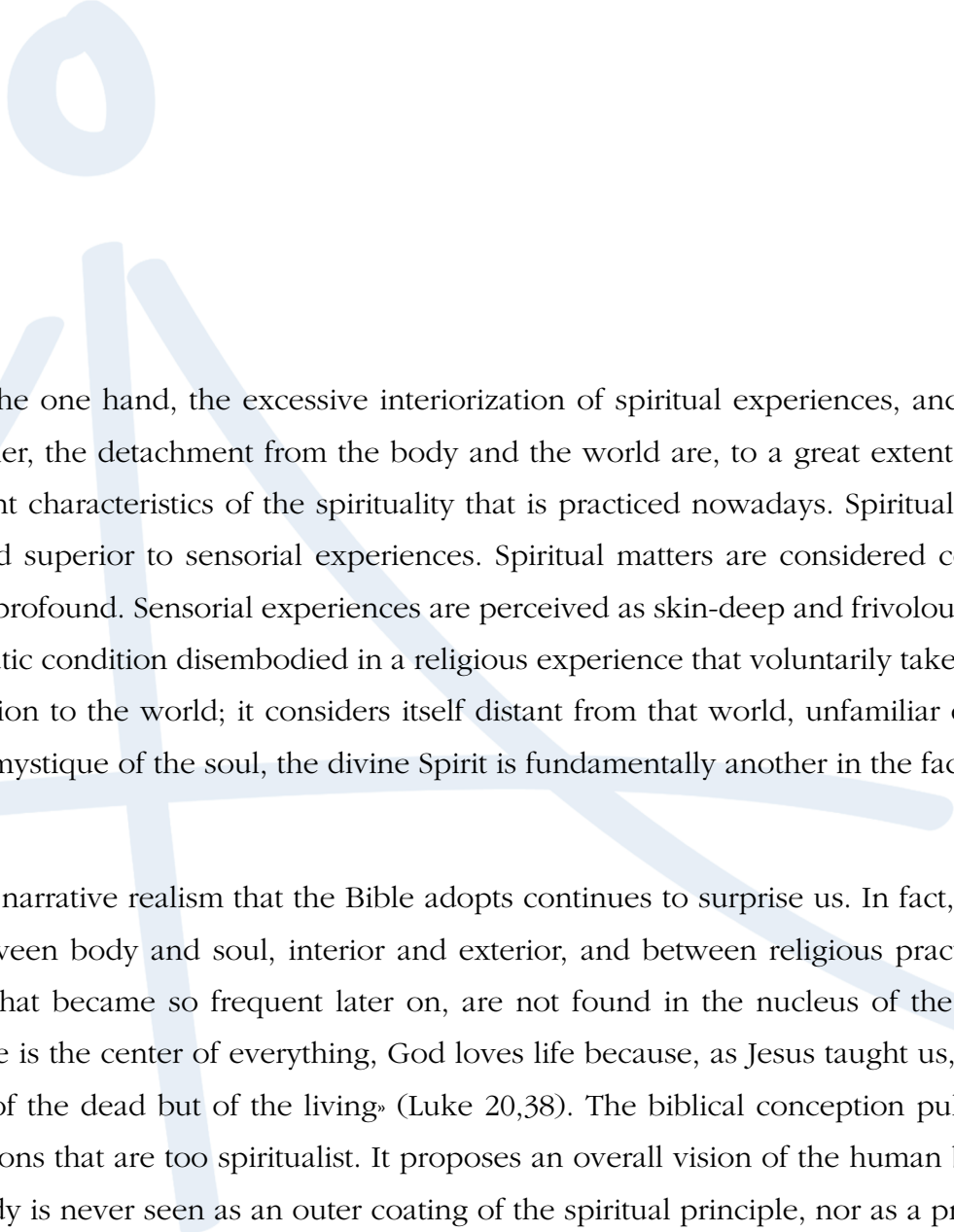
**Building bridges in
a fragmented
world**

*VIII Assembly of the Marist
International Network of
Institutions of Higher Education*

Peru 2019

When spirituality
does not forget
the five senses

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On the one hand, the excessive interiorization of spiritual experiences, and on the other, the detachment from the body and the world are, to a great extent, prominent characteristics of the spirituality that is practiced nowadays. Spiritual matters are considered superior to sensorial experiences. Spiritual matters are considered complex, precious and profound. Sensorial experiences are perceived as skin-deep and frivolous. There is a symptomatic condition disembodied in a religious experience that voluntarily takes refuge in contraposition to the world; it considers itself distant from that world, unfamiliar even. In the so called mystique of the soul, the divine Spirit is fundamentally another in the face of the present.

However, the narrative realism that the Bible adopts continues to surprise us. In fact, the oppositions between body and soul, interior and exterior, and between religious practice and ordinary life that became so frequent later on, are not found in the nucleus of the biblical revelation. Life is the center of everything, God loves life because, as Jesus taught us, «God is not the God of the dead but of the living» (Luke 20,38). The biblical conception pulls away from the versions that are too spiritualist. It proposes an overall vision of the human being in which the body is never seen as an outer coating of the spiritual principle, nor as a prison for the soul, as proposed by Platonism and its extended replicas. God created man in the image of himself (cf. Gn 1,27). As the theologian Louis-Marie Chauvet affirms, «spiritual matters happen only through what is corporeal». We could adapt one of Nietzsche's phrases, which says «There is more reason in your body than in your best wisdom», meaning that «There is more spirituality in our body than in our best theology».

A mystique with open eyes

In paleochristian art, we frequently find the representation of men and women at prayer. The way in which they are shown makes us think about how important the poetics of the body are, in order to believe. These figures are usually standing, with their heads held high, their arms extended and their eyes wide open. Not only our thoughts pray, our bodies do too. Prayer uses each one of our senses. For this reason, the Desert Fathers said that opening one's hands, even before saying any words, means that the person is already praying. Our gestures can form that relationship. And this also happens with the other senses. For this reason, the following phrase should not surprise us «when we open our eyes, we are already praying». When Saint John Chrysostom in his Moral Rules asks himself about the characteristics of a Christian, he starts by answering with this phrase: «Being aware of every day and every hour». Vigilance is the way in which we care for attention. It is not only an exercise, it is an interaction between the heart and the senses. It is contrary to the distractions that weaken the vivacity of the presence in every instant. A mystique with open eyes does not address a distant God: it lives with the consciousness of being before Him continuously. «For in Him we live, and move and have our being», says the apostle Paul in his famous speech in Athens (Acts 17,28). If we love God, we embrace the world and life in their entirety. A mystique is a declaration of love to life.

The meaning of mystique

Unfortunately, most of the approximations that are published about mystique nowadays have a historic nature, they embalm the past, they emphasize our feeling of distance and lack of actuality in relation to the addressed object. They also opt to individualize it, and it seems that the only way to understand it is through individual cases (the mystique of Hildegard of Bingen, Teresa de Ávila, and Juan de la Cruz), and it is never seen from a broader point of view.

For these reasons, if I am asked to explain the meaning of mystique, I will use Michel de Certeau's phrase: «Those who are mystical are those who cannot stop walking». It might seem that this is a strange phrase when we are trying to address complexity and the weight that the mystical category has gained in history. But long trips start with a small step, and similarly we understand our humble contribution. Now, in the phrase: «Those who are mystical are those who cannot stop walking», I identify firstly, an extraordinary quality: it does not exclude anybody. It testifies that mystique refers to everybody, that it is universal. This poses an enormous advantage because mystique has traditionally and wrongly been thought of as something different. It has been perceived as an experience for certain people only, as something that is

disconnected from concrete situations that most human beings go through, as something that cannot be stained from the problems of the present. The writings of figures such as Merton, Certeau, Raimon Panikkar or Pope Francisco have contributed to transforming our gaze. Mystique is «the integral experience of life», and those who are open to the wide extension of reality, those who are attentive and committed with the pain of the world are mystical. Their spirituality is developed in an ambivalent attitude: embodied and committed at the same time, but genuinely detached and free. This freedom requires the comprehension of independence that is so hard for us to see: between micro and macro, close and distant, inside and outside, ours and theirs, activity and rest, silence and word, stillness and gestures, immobility and journeys, spring and winter, hunger and bread, now and later. Those who discover that they cannot stop walking are mystical. Those who are sure about what is missing in their lives, those who understand that every place they visit is transitory and that the search continues are mystical. But it cannot be just this. And that excess of desire drives them forward, makes them move about and leave places behind. And as Michel de Certeau remembers, a mystical person «does not inhabit a place, they are inhabited». The mystique, understood as an integral experience in life, defies us and takes us to a new composition in which opposites (matter and spirit, body and soul, reason and sentiment, logos and myths, prose and poetry) are recognized and kept together. This is not about denying them or taking them to a confusing unit, this is about finding harmony.

I believe in the nudity of my life

Mystique is «a nude experience». Mystique is rooted in the domain of experience. The problem with so many resistances in relation to the mystique resides precisely in the evidence that shows that every kind of evanescence and escapism has been promoted on its behalf. This is contrary to what has been said in the Epistle to the Hebrews: «You did not want offerings or sacrifices; you have provided me with a body» (Heb 10,5). Mystique is important. It is body, experience, letter, place, tessitura of experiences. Most of the times, what the itinerary of the believer is missing are not ideas, but corporeality, resonance, and thickness. And in order to explain this, concepts and structures are not enough. The precariousness and fragility of the body, the concrete and universal cries that emanate from it, and its common and mundane breath, bring us closer to God. However, we must not forget that the mystical experience is a «naked experience». The experience of the believer poses trustworthiness, not a warranty. Faith does not own the object that founds it, because that object is always another. Just like Michel de Certeau says:

«When getting closer to those who they love, believers always experiment, in one way or an-

other, a feeling of emptiness: they embrace a shadow. They believe that they will find Him if they go and look for Him, but He is not there. They search everywhere, they scan each detail where He could be. But He is not anywhere».

Mystical people know that God can be found in absence. There is an empty and naked space between God and us.

We move in that space. What is essential is beyond it. Only in the poverty of our flesh and of our time (which are also God's flesh and time) can we discern it. See it, discern it and experience it in transparency. Not running away from what is trivial and ordinary, because God inhabits the entire span of our path. Because of that, we can understand the verse of the Portuguese poet Sophia de Mello Breyner Andersen, which starts as follows: «I believe in the nudity of my life». No matter how hard and turbulent it can be, there is not another path of greater clarity that allows us to begin the spiritual journey.

A spirituality project

There is a magnificent essay written by the North American essayist Susan Sontag, which is titled "The Aesthetics of Silence", and it starts with one of those unexpected phrases that forces us to stop. Dice: «Each epoch must reinvent its spirituality project for itself». I am sure that «reinvent for itself» does not mean to discover ex nihilo. It is more about rereading, about finding new hermeneutics, about taking the risk to find a new synthesis, about proposing on the basis of believing, but also on the act of living, a new spiritual grammar. We already have the model, and as we can prove in the Epistle to Titus, one of the treasures of the Christian canon (Tit 2,11-12): we need to take our humanity seriously, as it is God's narrative, who «lives in this world».

It is necessary to contemplate spirituality as an art of the human being. We often see illiteracy in ourselves in terms of the fundamental expressions in life. We can be certain sometimes, we can practice, we can know, but there are moments in life in which we are out of words, in which we feel unsupported: a sickness, a crisis, even profound joy, an important encounter... At certain moments we find ourselves in a path that seems parallel, because faith is not hospitable enough to accommodate what we are or what we have become. We need a new grammar that conciliates the terms that our culture perceived as irreconcilable: reason and sensibility, effectiveness and affection, individuality and social commitment, managing and compassion, spirituality and senses.

God is an accomplice of affectivity: omnipotent and fragile; liable and impassive; transcendent and loving; supernatural and sensitive. The craziest Christian pretension is not located in the metaphysical statements: it is simply faith in the resurrection of the body.

Fight against the atrophy of the senses

Our journey is in the hands of an autopilot that is limited to applying certain rules that have been previously established. Our senses doze off. No matter how new each day, morning or instant is, it opens as an unknown portal, however, we do not experience it as such. Our somnolent eyes can only see repetition.

I propose this image to try and explain what I want to say: it can be more practical to go to the supermarket or to the place where they sell fruits, but it will never be the same as crossing a temple of scents in an orchard. We are so far away from nature that we have forgotten things as basic as walking barefoot, moving the leaves from a fountain to drink some water, embracing life coming to us. This is how we have become «emotional illiterates». «I do not know how to feel, I do not know how to be human», Fernando Pessoa wrote this.

Has the time come to take care of our senses? Can this be the time to invigorate them? Has the time come to understand better the link between our senses and what makes sense? Isn't it urgent to integrate our senses in a continuous formation process?

«Accende lumen sensibus» («Light your senses»), said an ancient liturgical invocation that made it clear that it is necessary to develop our senses in the expression of the believers. Our senses open us up to the presence of God in the instant of the world. But we need to educate them, take care of them, cultivate them, refine them and integrate them from a spiritual perspective. For us, Christian men and women, it is important to answer the question about the senses, and this implies a pedagogy of sense revitalization.

We need touch

For example, touch has been described as our « first great eye». Skin covers our body, from head to toes. It separates and at the same time united the interior and the exterior. Our skin can read the texture, density, weight and temperature of matter. Our sense of touch connects us with time and memory: we make endless trips through touch, we would not be who we are if it weren't for this sense. Touch allows us to find each other instead of just running into each other. For this reason, the question that Jesus asked in the middle of a dense crowd still makes sense: «¿Who touched my cloak?» (Mark 5,31). The apostles reminded him, in vain, that

he was surrounded by a crowd and that people were touching him everywhere. But Jesus wants to tell us that there are different ways of touching.

Our biography is also a story of our skin and touch. The way in which we touch or we don't touch, the way in which we have been touched or we have not been touched, even if it is a silent story that we don't think about. However, it has a lot to teach us. Certain types of knowledge, not only in our childhood but also as adults, comes to us through touch.

The painter Joan Miró used to talk about the tactile origin of his paintings. In his youth, in Barcelona, his master was Francesc Gaulí, who in spite of being a conventional academic, he took risks and lead his students through unforeseen paths. Miró was not precisely a virtuous person when it came to drawing, but his master helped him: he used to put a blindfold on him so that he could touch with his fingers and not only with his eyes. Miró used to close his eyes, grab a small rock, and felt it and moved it several times in his hands. Then, finally, he could draw it.

We need taste

Jean-Jacques Rousseau reminds us of a great truth: there are thousands of things that are indifferent to touch, hearing or sight, but almost nothing is indifferent to our palate. In the jungle of thought of the philosopher Feuerbach, we find a very transparent expression, one that talks about the «Gospel of the Senses». When questioning the traditional division between superior and inferior senses, in terms of their cognitive qualities, Feuerbach defended that our palate elevates human beings in the dignity of the spiritual act.

We need an integral wisdom, one that appreciates not only our mind, but the reality of our bodies and the world around us. Our sense of taste represents one of the most elemental forces in life. There is a special bond between knowing and tasting, as confirmed by the Latin etymology (*sapere, sapor*). The excellent Brazilian pedagogue Rubem Alves used to say that «in order to enter a school, students and teachers should first go through a kitchen» and learn that wisdom and taste are the art of desire. From this, those of us who are devoted, should turn lifeless spaces into spaces with a taste of home.

We need smell

Smell is an immense path of knowledge, and a very subtle one! It awakens us for an immediate, flagrant and intimate contact with the world. A great deal of information that beings and the environments have can only be sensed through smell, which is very different from an

image. When it comes to images, the relationship between the subject and object is representation, but when it comes to smell, it adheres to us, it is pure impregnation. Image refers to an object that is outside of us. When smell locates a perfume, it means it has already entered our bodies.

After the first week of life, the baby recognizes the mother because of her smell. And many years later, most mothers miss the smell of their children when they were babies. One of the most emblematic phrases of the first Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Francisco was to suggest to the pastors to impregnate themselves with the «smell of the herd», and we all understood what he meant, even if we do not practice it.

How many times has a smell reminded us of something taken from the deepest part of our subconscious: our childhood home, an old closet, a toy, a station, a person that we have loved. The philosopher Walter Benjamin wrote about this phenomenon and said that we long for the recognition of a smell more than any other memory: we long for the privilege of comfort because «a smell can bring us back to those years in which it happened». When our sense of smell decreases, the cartography of our emotions does too.

It is possible that the smell of God will lead us to God? In one of his treatises, San Buenaventura speaks, for example, about the *vestigia odorifera* of Christ.

What can this mean for us today? What is the smell of Christ? What smell takes us to God? The great danger in a religious life is to become an aseptic life, without smell, without traces and without the capacity to leave a memory.

We need hearing

The world around us is completely sonorous, but the human ear can only capture a part of it. Human hearing cannot detect sounds below 20 Hz, any sound below this frequency is called infrasound. Even though a person cannot hear them, an elephant can do it easily and without having to get their ears closer to the ground, because their legs can also perceive sound waves. Likewise, we call ultrasounds those that are inaudible for us because they are above 20 000 Hz (the highest frequency that we can hear). A dog or a cat can for example, hear almost double that number. Sound diversity is a mysterious place. With our ears, we can hear the rumors of the exterior world, we can hear noise, voices or music that comforts us. However, when we talk about selfless listening, we feel that there is another level of hearing that we need to learn about. It is not only about listening with your ears, it is about hearing with your heart, a profound hearing where the senses are not useful. The psychoanalyst Julia

Kristeva talks about an *infra-language*, because it is linked to the body, to biology and to the passions; and an *ultra-language* that includes history, the ideas of the present and the future: all of these are challenges for the hearing sense.

Judaism and Christianity are religions based on hearing: «Listen, Israel...», this is how the significant prayer of the Shema Yisrael begins; and «Whoever has ears, listen» this is a phrase from the New Testament highlighted in the Christian Canon. ¿What are they asking us to hear? Maybe what the Brazilian novelist Clarice Lispector wrote: «Listen to me, listen to my silence. What I say is never what I say, it is something else. You need to find what I am really saying, because I cannot say it.

Can we hear our words and beyond them? What is the quality of our hearing ability? Are our communities places designed for hearing?

We need vision

Light travels at an astonishing speed of 300 000 kilometers per second. We owe the activation of the sophisticated mechanism that allows us to go from just from having eyes to being able to see to this hasty traveler. Some people remember that vision is not only a sense, but a conglomerate of senses: the sense of luminous intensity, the sense of colors, depth and distance... It is an infinite and fascinating debate. I remember a confession that the Italian poet Tonino Guerra made a countless number of times. He used to say that, just like believers, agnostics also doubt. And that, in his case, nothing provoked a greater crisis than thinking about the absolute miracle that is an eye. This left him completely disarmed in front of the gates of mystery. Sight turns the world into a window, but we need to understand that there are other essential dimensions in our gaze. To begin with, the dimension of reflexivity: the body, that looks at all things, can also look at itself; it can see and it can be seen at the same time. Just like the thinker Merleau-Ponty describes it, if our eyes were designed so that no other part of our body could be seen with them, or in the case of the animals that have lateral eyes, our body would not be the body of a human being.

Sight is fundamental to celebrate the encounter with ourselves and with others. Only when we look at ourselves and let the other impress us, we love people for who they are. Likewise, sight is essential when we want to begin the adventure of finding meaning to life. One of the most important theological treaties about vision, the Vision of God (*De visione Dei*), is born from the letters between its author, Nicolás de Cusa, and his friends, the monks from *Tegernsee* about what it means to see. These letters were destined to initiate that Benedictine com-

munity in the ineffable vision of God. Nicolás de Cusa explains the Vision of God as follows: «The angle of your eyes, my God, is not quantitative, it is infinite. For that reason, it can see everything around it, it can see up and down simultaneously [...]. The creatures exist because of your vision. If they could not see you, (and you are the one who can see) they would not receive the being from you. The being of the creatures is to see and be seen simultaneously».

To conclude, I think that life is an immense laboratory: our senses confirm it. They contain the reverberation of a fantastic presence: that of the steps of God. We need to look at our body again, at our existence, this is the prophecy of an unconditional love: «For God loved the world so much that He gave His One and only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life» (John 3,16). We learn this through our body and our senses, not only mentally. We are, let's never forget, God's grammar.

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