

“TRACES OF THE CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE”

1. Formulation of the Human Problem

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THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Even after sharing their lives with Jesus for such a long time, after the disaster of Calvary and the mystery of Easter, after all that, the apostles understood little of Him. Only a few hours before His ascent into Heaven, they still asked Him when he would establish the Kingdom of Israel, such as everyone conceived it at that time: a kingdom of earthly and political power.

“So when they had come together they asked Him, ‘Lord will you at this time restore the Kingdom of Israel?’”¹

If they did not understand Him, why did they follow Him? And among them were those who had left wife, children, home, boat and nets, offices, business. Why did they follow Him?

They followed Christ because He had become the focus of their affections. Why?

Where they had been unaware and confused, they were enlightened, for Christ was the only one in whose words they felt their whole human experience understood and their needs taken seriously, clarified. Thus, for instance, those very people who used to believe that their only need was bread began to understand that “Man does not live by bread alone.”²

Christ introduces Himself to them in just this way, as *an Other*, who surprisingly moves in their direction, helps them, explains their troubles to them; He cures them if they are crippled or blind, heals their souls, responds to their needs, is within their experience. But what are their experiences? Their experiences, their needs, are their very selves, those men and women, their own human nature.

Thus Christ is right here, in my attitude and disposition as a human being, in my way, that is, as one who expects, awaits something, because I sense that I am entirely wanting. He has joined me. He has proposed Himself to my original needs.

Hence, to meet Christ we must first formulate our human problem seriously.

First, we must open ourselves to ourselves. In other words, we must be acutely aware of our experiences and look on the humanity within us with sympathy; we must take into consideration who we really are. To take into consideration means to take seriously what we experience, *everything* we experience, to discover every aspect, to seek the complete meaning.

We must be very careful, because all too easily we do not start from our true experience; that is, from our experience in its entirety and authenticity. We often identify »

¹ Acts 1:6.

² See Matthew 4:4; Luke 4:4.

* “Traces of the Christian Experience” in *The Journey to Truth Is an Experience*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal 2006, pp. 53-58.

» our experience with partial impressions, truncating it, as often happens with affective matters, when we fall in love or dream about the future.

Even more often we confuse our experience with the prejudices or schemes that we absorb from our environment, perhaps unawares. Therefore, instead of opening up to that attitude of expectation, sincere attention, and dependence that our experience suggests and fervently demands, we impose categories and explanations that constrict and distress our experience, while presuming to resolve it.

The myth that "scientific progress one day will solve all our needs" is the modern formula of this presumption, a wild and repugnant presumption, because it does not consider or even know our real needs. It refuses to observe our experience clearly and to accept what it means to be human, with all the needs that this implies. For this reason modern civilization causes us to move blindly between this desperate presumption and darkest despair.

SOLITUDE

A vital cue comes to us from the situation of the apostles as narrated to us in verses 9 to 11 in the first chapter of the Acts.

Christ has left and they remain there still and astonished. Hope has vanished and solitude falls upon them just as darkness and cold descend on the earth after sunset. The more we discover our needs, the more we become aware that we cannot resolve them on our own. Nor can others, people like us. A sense of *powerlessness* accompanies every serious experience in our lives.

This sense of powerlessness generates solitude. True solitude does not come from being physically alone but from the discovery that a fundamental problem of ours cannot find its solution in us or in others.

We can well say that the sense of solitude is borne in the very heart of every serious commitment to our own humanity. Those who believe they have found the solution to a great need of theirs in something or someone, only to have this something or someone disappear or prove incapable of resolving this need, can understand this. We are alone in our needs, in our need to be and to live intensely, like one alone in the desert. All he or she can do is wait until someone appears. And human persons will certainly not provide the solution because it is precisely their needs that must be resolved.

COMMUNITY

The apostles returned to the place where Christ had ascended into heaven and they stayed together.³

One who truly discovers and lives the experience of powerlessness and solitude does not remain alone. Only one who has experienced powerlessness to its depths, and hence personal solitude, feels close to others and is easily drawn to them. Like someone lost, without shelter in a storm, he or she feels his or her cry at one with the cries of others, his or her anxiety and expectation at one with the anxieties and expectations of all others.

Only one who truly experiences helplessness and solitude stays with other people without self-interest, calculation, or imposition, yet at the same time without "following the crowd" passively, submitting, or becoming a slave of society.

You can claim to be seriously committed to your own human experience only when you sense this community with others, with anyone and everyone, without frontiers and discrimination, for we live our commitment to what is most deeply within us and therefore »

³ See Acts 1:12-14.

» common to all. You are truly committed to your own human experience when, saying "I", you live this "I" so simply and profoundly that you feel fraternally bonded to any other person's "I." God's answer will reach only the person committed in such a way.

It must immediately be pointed out that this solidarity with all of humanity is achieved in a particular place. Even in the Acts the community of the apostles is born in a very specific situation.⁴ They did not choose the place or the people. They found themselves there almost by chance and their whole life depended on this fact.⁵

This is how our personal humanity is born, shaped, and nourished, in a particular *setting*: we find ourselves in it; we don't choose it.

Our effort to understand the entire setting and offer our sense of community to all the people in that setting, measures the openness of our human commitment and is commensurate with the sincerity of our commitment to all humanity. It is not up to us to exclude anyone from the experience of our human life; only God can make that choice and He does so through the situation in which He places us. Otherwise it would be a private matter on our part, a selfish looking-inward; we would be taking advantage of a given situation through our own preconceived schemes.

AUTHORITY

Peter, the most representative person in the community, stands up and speaks, and he is heeded.⁶

In our particular milieu some individuals have a greater sensitivity to the human experience; *in fact* they develop a deeper understanding of any given situation and of others; *in fact* they are more likely to influence the movement that builds a community. They live our experience more intensely and with a greater commitment. We all feel that they are more representative of us. With them we feel closer to, and stay more willingly in community with, others. To acknowledge this phenomenon is to be loyal to our own humanity, a duty spurred by wisdom.

When we discover ourselves helpless and alone, our humanity spurs us to come together. If we meet someone who better feels and understands our experience, suffering, needs, and expectations, we naturally are led to follow that person and become his or her disciple. In that sense, such persons naturally constitute *authority* for us even if they do not carry special rights or titles. Naturally, above all, it is one who most loyally lives or understands the human experience who becomes an authority.

Thus authority is born as a wealth of experience that imposes itself on others. It generates freshness, wonder, and respect. Inevitably, it is attractive; it is evocative. Not to value the presence of this *effective authority* that His Being places in every setting is to cling pettily to our own limits. The Jews said of Christ: "This is one who has authority" and they abandoned the schemes of the Pharisees to follow Him.

The encounter with this natural authority develops our sensitivity and our conscience; it helps us to discover better our nature and what we aspire to from the depths of our present poverty.

PRAYER

Verse 14 of Acts I shows us the community of the apostles awaiting what Christ had promised. "All these joined together in assiduous prayer."

Those who discover their own helplessness live in community and are aware that »

⁴ See Acts 1:13, 23-6.

⁵ See Acts 1:21-26.

⁶ See Acts 1:15-22.

» their lives are shared with others only when they have *the presentiment of something beyond their own situations* that can resolve these situations. A community can come about only when there is a common expectancy (even a man and woman who truly love each other have this unshakeable presentiment; otherwise they do not take their relationship seriously).

Our experiences, when really taken seriously, are painful, for they make us discover that we are full of needs, unresolved problems, sorrow, and ignorance. If these experiences are truly taken seriously, they unequivocally require something "else," something "beyond"; that is, they possess a genuine religious dimension.

If our experiences are taken seriously they are an authentic prophecy (expectancy, hope) of what we do not yet have.

What we still lack is the *meaning* of all our experiences. And we await it, perhaps unconsciously.

If we are truly aware of this expectancy, of our human incapacity and of what our nature relentlessly tells us, then this expectancy is bound to become *prayer*. It will become prayer to a mysterious Other who will be able to help and will provide a solution. It will become prayer to that God who elicits our question and who will provide the answer.

Thus, prayer is simple petition, entreaty; our most simple, heartfelt, and fundamental act of human awareness. The most realistic person is the one who prays: that person takes his or her experience seriously.

Prayer is also *a plea made together, in common*. The discovery of our powerlessness to achieve happiness is also the discovery of what we have most in common with all others: this powerlessness is what is most human in each of us.

Thus, even the disposition to await the help of that Other, is shared by all; it is communal by its very nature, so much so that no one can have that disposition without feeling himself or herself as "one heart"⁷ with everyone.

We remind you that it is possible to send questions and witnesses to the website <http://eventi.comunioneliberazione.org/gscontributi/>

⁷ Acts 4:32.