



The backpack of the SES

Listening to the people of our cities with the heart

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Reflections of the Cardinal Vicar of Rome, Monsignor Angelo Di Donatis. (September 2019)

1. First of all: what are we listening to?

The organ of listening is not the ear but the heart. Mary suggests it to us who meditated and kept in her heart all that she heard (Lk 2:19). In the Bible the heart is the centre of the person, it is the whole of his interiority: thoughts, feelings, will, conscience, memory ... The heart of man is an abyss and there our whole life is deposited: that of which we are aware and that of which we are not aware. We inevitably listen with our hearts, that is, with our whole selves, with all that we are and have lived.

This however, already makes us understand what difficulty we can encounter when we decide to listen to the other and what is required of us to really do it: we must make room for the other within ourselves, welcome the other in our hearts, avoid projecting onto him, attributing to him, perceptions, sensations, intentions, evaluations that in reality are only in our heart. It is well and truly a work of asceticism: to silence the thousands of voices that live there to be able to welcome and truly listen to the other as another distinct-from-me.

How crucial it is to know how to listen, this is the hospitable attitude of our heart! And it is essential to have the predisposition of a spirit of pleasantness towards the other: welcoming him in the heart with an attitude of benevolence, because he is our brother, preparing ourselves for a true relationship, nourished by listening and mutual dialogue.

In this, the baggage of lived experiences that is deposited in our heart, instead of being a disturbing element that alters listening by projecting onto the other what is ours alone, can become the motive that leads us to listen with benevolence and sympathy : the other is not different from me, but like me he has lived and lives joys and sadness, anguishes and hopes. What we have in common is life and humanity. Certainly, some painful experiences we have suffered, especially if they are the consequence of deceit and malice, can feed the distrust and prejudice towards others; but if I let the Lord console and heal my heart, the Holy Spirit will free me from resentment and forge a heart within me capable of compassion for the sufferings and miseries of others, wherever they are and to whatever reality they belong.

2. The heart inhabited by the Spirit.

But the reflection on what we listen to must also take into account another aspect: in the heart of man lives, The Holy Spirit, the presence of God. The Spirit, who reminds us of the words of Jesus so that I might take them to myself and announce them (Jn 16.14-15), he acts in the depths of our heart; so that when we listen to the Word of God, in the liturgical proclamation or in the witnessing of our brothers, the Spirit quivers and confirms from within that it is precisely the Word of God that we are listening to with our ears. The Word that reaches us from the outside finds correspondence in the inner resonance aroused by the Spirit. Mostly it is the feeling of joy that accompanies listening to the Word of God: in his first letter to the Thessalonians Saint Paul writes: "You took us and the Lord as your model, welcoming the word with the joy of the Holy Spirit in spite of great hardship". (1Ts 1,6). However, when the Lord needs to convert us from a path of evil in which we have set out, the Spirit makes the Word resound within us, causing disturbance, sadness, repentance.

Thus, we understand that listening with the heart means listening in the power of the Holy Spirit. Saint Augustine wrote of the interior Master: "He will be the only teacher who is the interior Master of the inner man, who in your mind shows you that what is taught is true" (Letter 266).

3. Listening to the lives of others with the heart, the Spirit acts in the heart.

God, who has an immense heart in which there is room for each man, has heard the cry of the inhabitants of one's own country and has sent us into the midst of the city to perform an exercise of listening, because often we do not want to nor are able to hear that cry.

The truth is that we rarely listen with the heart. Moreover, our heart is often narrow, not hospitable, there is no space for the lives of others. Or we believe we already know how to listen, we tell ourselves that deep down we already know what the others are shouting, that we have already heard the complaints of the inhabitants of our city so many times in the bus, from colleagues at work, in the bar or in line at the post ... There is nothing interesting in the lives of others, they are trivial and empty, often marked by a **tram-tram (drudgery?)** that makes their life and our daily life boring.

How reductive and prejudiced is this way of looking at reality! I will say more: it is a way of thinking of atheistic disciples-evangelizers! Why? Because it is a way of listening to the lives of others that reveals that one does not believe in the Risen Lord and in the power of the Holy Spirit. It is made of a heart that is not aware of being inhabited by the Spirit of God and (a heart) that does not believe that the Holy Spirit lives the hearts of the brothers. Nor does it grasp that human history is guided by the Spirit. The horizon is absolutely flat. The gaze is hopelessly restricted, too concentrated below.

Instead, the contemplative heart knows how to recognize God's presence and action in the lives of others and in human history with authentic spiritual clarity. Let us think about Mary: the Mystery of God in history is for the moment only a very small child conceived in her womb, yet her heart is already exultant and sees the subversion of human society taking shape on the horizon: it has overthrown the mighty from their thrones, (and) raised up the humble.

This is having a contemplative heart, this is being inhabited by the Spirit! And only this Marian heart knows how to listen. She listens, puts together, the words heard by the angel, by the shepherds and by the old Simeon and Anna, in the Holy Spirit she meditates on them, seizing the connection that binds them, that is the work of God, and keeps them with love in her heart.

The little ones, the poor, deserve that we listen to them in this way. Taking them seriously, as God does. And above all recognizing the story that God weaves with them, starting from their seemingly trivial lives. As the Spirit quivers and rejoices in us when we listen to the Word of God proclaimed in the liturgy or meditated in Scripture, so our hearts can recognize the Word of God that is embodied in the lives of others and builds paths of holiness. The examples can be many. I borrow the list that Pope Francis makes at the beginning of **"Gaudete et exultate"**:

"I like to contemplate the holiness present in the patience of God's people: in those parents who raise their children with immense love, in those men and women who work hard to support their families, in the sick, in elderly religious who never lose their smile. In their daily perseverance I see the holiness of the Church militant. Very often it is a holiness found in our next-door neighbours, those who, living in our midst, reflect God's presence." (GeE 7).

When, in a moment of confidence, the other tells us what he is going through at this stage of his life, and communicates his desires for himself and his family, his dreams and hopes, concern for tomorrow combined with the confidence that the knots will untie and that a door will open ...

isn't this a thrust coming from the Holy Spirit? What is this trust based on, if not in the strength of the Spirit, a guarantee for the future that awaits us? When a young person becomes passionate about ecological or social issues and deepens them, making inquiries and comparing himself with others, and decides to give his small but great contribution, through the sharing of ideas, the affirmation of the right principles, having the courage to say "I'm not OK with that" and "no one should be left behind" ... what is behind this beautiful obstinacy if not the Spirit of truth, of the kingdom of God which is love, justice, peace? When a family experiences that their new neighbours come from a foreign country, with different cultural and religious traditions, but that it is profoundly enriching to learn to know each other, to respect each other, to help each other, and that prejudices fail to leave space for what unites ... is it not a foretaste of that new world that the Spirit is realizing in the world, through the birth and groans of human history?

Our cities, our neighbourhoods, are full of people and families who live the beatitudes, who struggle and strive every day for the good of their children and for the future of all. And from the little ones like Mary and Joseph, it is from the human peripheries like the Nazareth of the Gospel, that the Lord wants to restart a new phase of the life of the Church and of the world. We are asked to listen to the cry of pain and childbirth of the new world, to recognize the presence of God and the Spirit in the lives of people and of human history. There God acts. Only a heart inhabited by the Spirit knows how to listen and recognize it.

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