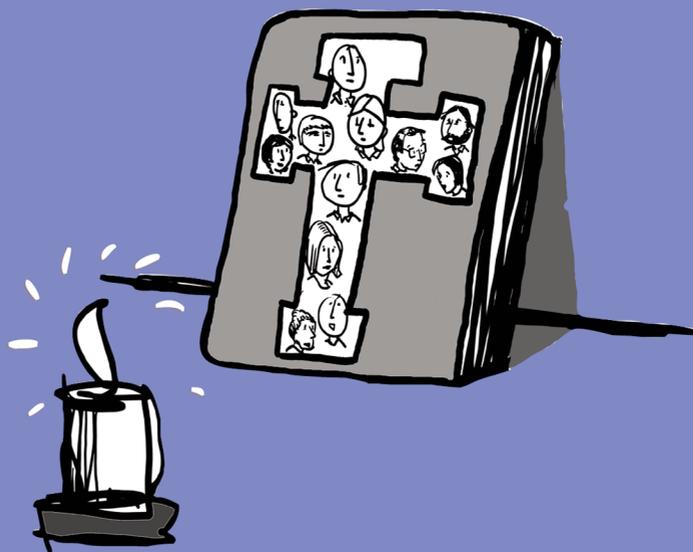


booklets

**«I'M COMING, LORD»
Contemplatives in Relation**



**«I'M COMING, LORD»
CONTEMPLATIVES IN RELATION**

José Ignacio González Faus

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The companions of Ignatius Loyola used to say that he was a «contemplative in action». This doesn't ignore the fact that the saint spent hours in prayer. Rather it indicates the flow of contemplation: from pure inactivity to human action.

And the main arena of human action is precisely *relations*. Being busy with things and nature, with study and art, may require attention; but for a contemplative soul such activities easily open up windows onto the mystery of the "beyond". By contrast, interpersonal relations make such an opening much more difficult: not only because of selfishness –our own and that of others– but because of the mystery, the complexity, and differences we find in human beings. Also because of the fast paced, casual nature of many of our relations.

The following considerations make an earnest attempt to extend the Ignatian motto (contemplatives in action) toward the further summit of being "contemplatives in relation", so that there we may hope to find the greatest treasures of a life shaped by faith and the following of Jesus Christ.

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1. CHRISTIAN CONTEMPLATION AND “RELIGIOUS CONTEMPLATION”

Putting contemplation at the heart of interpersonal relations is something very particular to Christianity. This is too often forgotten we make wholehearted attempts to reconcile Christian faith with the general human tendency to be religious and to make our faith emerge from that. The fact that something is very particularly Christian certainly doesn't mean that it is any less human. Rather, the reverse is true: *it is what is most profoundly human* (and therefore observable also from outside Christianity). But it does have the meaning that Dietrich Bonhoeffer often repeated in his letters from prison: «the God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ turns upside down everything that “religious” people might expect of God».

1.1. Theological foundation

For that very reason, our statement regarding the particularity of Christian contemplation requires that we demonstrate this from the Christian texts themselves, and so we will begin with them. Let us take note, then, of the following characteristics, all pointing in the same direction.

a) Myriad modern theologians have repeated endlessly that Jesus spoke very

little about God and a great deal about God's Reign and that he did not talk about «seeking God first» but about «seeking first the Reign of God and his justice». Jesus did not urge people to be converted to God, but rather told them to prepare themselves to enter the Kingdom of God (or to be converted so as to be able to enter it). These aspects of Jesus' preaching are nowadays unquestioned and could be developed further.

b) The truth is that Jesus does not give lessons in theology or spirituality. He does not reveal the attributes of God's being (calling God *Abba* does not reveal a divine attribute but a way of relating to God). Plain and simply, Jesus announces God's incredible love for human beings, so that Luke (chapter 15) even compares it with what money is for human beings: God truly rejoices when "a single one" of the lost sheep is found again (just as the rich man feels greater joy about recovering the million he lost than he does about the nine million that were never in danger). Accordingly, Jesus is positively thrilled when he sees that those who are despised by human societies understand the mysteries of God better than the wise and powerful do.

c) Jesus marvels at nature: he points to the beauty of the lilies and the freedom of the birds, he knows about the tender care required by a grape vine or a fig tree, and he is amazed by the vital power which makes a seed grow by itself while the laborer sleeps. Still, when inviting us to pray, Jesus does not tell us to give thanks or to become absorbed in the mystery of the universe (although this, of course, may also be the case). The prayer Jesus teaches us invites us to ask for the coming of God's Reign, which means the triumph of what is fully human: sufficient food for all and reconciliation among those estranged. In a word, justice and peace.

Like Jesus, Augustine was highly sensitive to the beauty of nature but when he sought God in the glories of nature he heard a voice telling him: «Seek what is above us»¹. The reason

for this is that, while natural beauty can suggest God, only history *manifests the will* of God. And history is the weaving together of all our human *relations*.

This teaching of the Nazarene is made magnificently explicit after his Resurrection, which the scriptures see as the recapitulation of the whole universe (Ephesians 1,14). Let us look at some examples of that.

d) Chapter three of the letter to the Ephesians contains a song expressing the author's total amazement. The song seems to reflect the profound personal experience of Paul,² who is astonished by the revelation that that all human being are children of one great family: *all without exception*. He realizes that this is simply the consequence of the Mystery that has been revealed, the Mystery that sustains everything and surpasses everything, the Mystery that is active in all creation and constitutes "the most exalted wisdom", namely, the love of God made visible in Jesus Christ. With that revelation, all human relations are transformed: they are "Christified", divinized. Since that transformation necessarily affects our way of viewing relations, our call to be «contemplatives in relation» runs parallel to our «understanding of the mystery of Christ» (Eph 3,4).

e) For the same reason, the first Christian communities created the formula "in Christ" or "in the Lord", which served to *characterize all human relations* (couples, relatives, master/slave, etc.). All human relations are inserted into a sort of new atmosphere that transforms them: «there are brothers, sisters, sons, daughters, inspectors,

and friends in the Lord; there are greetings, well-wishes, exhortations ... in the Lord, and the mutual belonging of man and woman is in the Lord»³. That way of living or being “in Christ” is what grounds our contemplation on human relations.

f) We can therefore understand better the anecdote recounted in early Christian tradition about the apostle John: when he was almost a hundred years old, the last living witness of the earthly Jesus, John did little more than repeat: love one another, love one another... When people complained that he kept saying the same thing and asked him to tell them something new, the apostle John replied: *«It's all there, and that's enough»*. This is a great truth, for there we find faith-hope-charity; there we find God, Christ, the Church, and the best of what is human.

1.2. Consequences

All these considerations, then, indicate a different way of conceiving our faith commitment (our relation to God). We are talking about something different from a general religious practice or from a type of Christianity which follows Jesus because he is believed to be the Revelation of God. Our approach also indicates that Christianity differs basically from other forms of religion in the way it conceives of prayer and contemplation. For Christianity, fraternal love and relations with other persons cannot be separated from the relation with God. For that reason, they cannot be separated from Christian prayer and contemplation either. The

reader should understand that what we are saying is not “reductionist” (unless we want to accuse the Master himself of being a reductionist); rather, it is a much more difficult path than the more common religious one. One might suspect that the accusation of reductionism is an excuse fabricated by those who are trying to escape the approach to God through what Jesus called «the narrow gate». They seem not to have grasped the profound “theological” transformation of human relations in Christianity, as we explained it in the previous section.

We can understand, then, this diary entries of Egide van Broeckhoven (a Belgian Jesuit worker priest who died in a workplace accident at age 34): «There's a false contemplative prayer, which happens on the edges of life, and there's a true contemplative prayer which dominates life»; «God is found when everything is given up *for the sake of this world*»⁴.

Such “Christian transformation” should affect our way of focusing on human relations, precisely because it is a revelation which *clashes with the most elemental experience we have*: the arduous, very difficult task of relating humanly to one another. Well known is the kind comment of John of the Cross, upon his return to Castilla from Jaén, when he was gathering chickpeas in the field: «Handling these dead creatures is more agreeable than being manhandled by living ones»⁵. We might well add that today we are living in a historical epoch when human relations seem to have deteriorated and when conflicts are constant in all parts: racism and

exclusive nationalism thrive, class warfare revives, cultures prefer to clash rather than to dialogue, marriages fail, gender violence increases, and political parties see themselves as totalities and not just “parts” of the whole. The cultural autism that we inhale daily encourages us to see others as mere objects or entities, not as subjects with absolute dignity.

Whether believers or non-believers, all of us must try to grease the friction points in our social networks. Otherwise we run the risk of sliding down a slippery slope and ending up in an unprecedented catastrophe—as if all the catastrophes we have already provoked in the course of history were not enough. This booklet, especially the first sections, is addressed mainly to Christians, but it also aspires, at least in the latter part, to be of some use to those who do not have the enormous, unmerited benefit of faith and to those searchers Pascal has in mind when he says, «You would not seek me if you had not already found me».

1.3. Need to recover the best of Christianity

In the course of history the Christian message has often been obscured, even though it has never lost sight of the importance of what the New Testament surprisingly calls the «*new* commandment». There is no doubt that the Hellenization of Christianity played a role in the distortion of its message. Such a process was necessary and was indeed an amazing feat, but like all types of inculturation, there was a price to be

paid, one that could be seen clearly only with the decline of the culture then adopted by the faith.

We hear stories, for example, of desert fathers who went about «so absorbed in God» that they didn’t even respond to those who greeted them on the road. In a later century Thomas à Kempis, in a great classic of Catholic spirituality which has much undeniable value, wrote his famous dictum: «Whenever I went out among men, I returned less a man» (no. 147). The problem with this saying (which some say comes not from Kempis but from Seneca) is not what it states, but that it states just that and nothing more.

1.3.1. A more Christian anthropology

By contrast, the scriptures and the man Jesus never speak this way, even though they are fully conscious of the countless dangers involved in human relations. Despite the risks, they teach us (and here faith plays a much larger part than rational arguments) that *human beings and their relations to one another (free and fraternal) are precisely what God loves most*, even to the point where he gave them «his very own Son». They also teach us that all great goals are reached by steep paths or through very narrow gateways.

The Neo-Platonism which enveloped Christianity tended to see only the negative side of human beings; it sought human perfection in fleeing from people. Jesus, however, taught that even the “impure” can be an image of God that should not be rejected but restored. The sick person should not be

left by the wayside but should be reintegrated into the community. Even a harsh exploiter like Zaccheus should be given a chance. We will take up these figures again in the third part, but for now suffice it to say that the relation-avoidance advice from the ascetical traditions displays more the influence of Stoicism than the presence of Jesus.

In contrast, our determination to seek Christian contemplation in human relations themselves is much more in keeping with modern anthropology, which insists that human beings (and beings in general) are better defined as *relation* than as mere *substance*. The evolutionary vision of the world—in biology, and in the philosophy and theology that flow from it—conceives of «reality as a process that is interdependent and relational». All reality is ontologically relational, and naturally much more so personal reality, which is a pale reflection of the being of God, in whom the person is defined as relation.⁶ The «image and likeness of God» which defines humanity (Gen 1,26 ff.) refers, among other things, to the consistency and density of the relational aspect in the definition of the person.

1.3.2. *A more Christian theology*

This conception is more in keeping not only with anthropology, but also with theology, for one of the most basic meanings of the dogma of the Trinity is

that God is “Absolute Communion” and not just “the absolute being”. If such is the case, then being submerged in God, as a privileged form of contemplation, does not mean simply drowning in metaphysical mystery; rather it means being lifted up into an atmosphere of relation, into an interpersonal mystery, where the person is defined as relation: as donation and union.

All this transforms the task of being human into a “relational” one. Psychoanalysis teaches us that we are “separate beings” from the moment of our birth. Our being separate, which comes about as soon as the umbilical cord is cut, is the root of our infinite capacity for desire, which transforms us into desiring beings who search for a total fusion which can overcome our separation. We search for it first at our mother’s breast, then in everything we can put in our mouth, later still in our jealousies, our possessiveness, our longing for complete sexual union—«always seeking wholeness in the fog», to paraphrase a verse from Machado. In the end, hopefully, we learn that the completeness we yearn for is impossible and that our growth as persons consists instead in seeking the Other and learning to relate to the Other.⁷

Having thus established the centrality and the theoretical importance of our subject, we will now attempt to approach it through a sort of guided experience (mystagogy).

2. INITIATION INTO CONTEMPLATION AND MYSTERY

As we have just seen, Christian faith takes very seriously the belief that human beings are images or reflections of God, much more so than the beauty of nature, the immensity of sea and desert, the mysteries of the starry sky, or all those other “sparks” that seem to speak to us about God. The seriousness of that belief is not diminished but is even increased, and that, despite our Christian hymns about «Your image enshrouded with guilt» or sometimes, more than enshrouded, destroyed or shattered. This obscuring of the divine image can cause difficulties for our proposed project, but...

2.1. Human mystery and divine mystery

Since that belief is at the heart of our faith, Christians should become ever more accustomed to *seeing each person whom they come across in life as a member of Christ and a child of God*, someone “just like me”. This way of seeing people should be true not only with regard to friends, but also when dealing with strangers, beggars, bankers, terrorists, relatives, monarchs, enemies, atheists, or bishops. Being Christian means viewing every thus consistently and then converting that vision into a

decisive factor in the way we treat each and every person.

Only on this basis can we reach down into the unique, matchless depths of each person, beyond all the conditioning of culture, social class, family, medical history, or personal development. If I remember well, Jacques Leclercq years ago wrote this about human love: «the person who truly says “I love you” says something *completely new*, even though millions of others have already said the same thing previously»⁸. In contrast, in mating with a female, the male animal is not doing

anything new or original. The perennial novelty of the human person, which is the source of the person's sacred dignity as mentioned earlier, holds true for all men and women, not just for those of one's own family, nation, race, or religion. But it is not at all easy for us to reach this point, to attain this vision and maintain this posture: it is like a horizon that we can move toward but never quite reach. Still, even though the horizon is never attained, walking in that direction carries human life into surprising, unknown territories. The true object of what tradition called "asceticism" is the training of the will and human sensibility for precisely that type of seeing and that way of being in the world. Christian asceticism is not a project of cosmetic surgery. Rather it is training that helps us discover the unsuspected riches and hidden treasures involved in human relations. Our relations travel along that path in a kind of unending marathon, progressing from "man (or woman) as object" to "man (or woman) as mystery". Thus we understand better the observation of Egide van Broeckhoven: «The deepest detachment makes sense only as a stage toward the deepest attachment».¹⁰

Christians undertake this ascetical effort out of a profound conviction and experience of their own helplessness, but always trusting that whatever little effort they make, directed by what Christian faith calls «the Breath (Spirit) of God», can carry them to unsuspected goals, for which they are most grateful. In this trusting effort they will find that many of the dimensions present in all

relations become enriched and reordered; though at first they may appear contradictory, they are capable of being harmonized as people mature.

We can see this exemplified in the surprising duality between the two forms of human relating that are at once the most beautiful and the most spontaneously contemplative: friendship and love. Love always longs for greater union and realizes that its longing is never quite fulfilled. On the other hand, in friendship even the "poorest" and simplest gesture opens up a tremendous prospect of union. We see, then, that love and friendship, the two peaks of every human relation, are not simply opposed: rather, both are partial and have their proper spheres and moments as regards the material aspect of the relation. At the same time, as regards the formal element of the relation, they are complementary: they add rather than subtract. Both types of relation can therefore speak of God and can refer us to him.

That is why nothing that we are saying here should be understood to mean that being a «contemplative in relation» does not require times of solitude and *personal* contemplation. The only point we make is that such personal prayer should in large measure be a school and a way of preparing for this other contemplation, which is more difficult and does not burst forth spontaneously. Other persons should often be the subject matter of our prayer, in accord with the teaching of an old master of the spirit: praying is not looking at God but «looking at the world with the eyes of God».

2.2. From the God glimpsed to the God revealed

In human life there are experiences which suggest transcendence or which at least invite us to enter into them to search for something more. Such are the experience of beauty or gratuitous kindness, the experience of immensity in the desert or before the sea, the experience of majesty in mountain peaks, or the experiences of human relationships, of plenitude and peace (in music), or of love (a pleasant sensation of fusion).

In reality, all these experiences spring from an intimate closeness to being and from an awareness of being as something both real and incredible. The Jorge Guillén expresses it in a succinct, trinitarian form: «Amazement at being: sing!»¹¹ There is the threefold reality: being itself, the amazed consciousness of being (the Logos), and the bliss of being (the song).¹²

All these glimpses of transcendence give rise to a variety of religious attitudes, and often there is talk of an “oceanic feeling” as the basis of the search for God—a concept much more appropriate than fear, which only knows how to forge idols.

So then, what is specific to Christianity at the level of *attitudes* (as opposed to *contents*) is to be found in the invitation to listen, since God is responsive to those glimpses of transcendence: «what you glimpse is more within your reach than you think, but it is there where you least expect it: in the poor and the sick..., where all seems emptied out and extinguished». Thus, if the particularity of religious eros arises

from the “seek above” which Augustine thought he heard, the particularity of Christian eros is rather to “seek below”. This transformation of religious eros is imperative for Christians. We can cite here a pertinent phrase from the Ignatian tradition: «the divine is that which cannot be bound by what is greatest and yet is contained in what is smallest»¹³. This perspective also helps us to understand the saying that summed up the faith experience of Etty Hillesum: «helping God»¹⁴. We are invited to help God not to die (when we receive him in his disfigured aspect) and to be born or to grow (or be reborn) in others.

That is the surprising Christian paradox: *adoring God becomes helping God*, and helping our fellow human becomes adoration of God. Besides Etty Hillesum, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and other Christian witnesses of the last century testified to this paradox in a thousand different ways. They help us make sense of what Jesus recommended to the Samaritan woman: we are to adore God, not in this place or that, but «in spirit and in truth ... because God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth» (Jn 4,23).

Interestingly, these same witnesses testify that this attitude ends up becoming something that might be called “experience of resurrection”. In the testimonies of worker priests and many missionaries (sometimes martyrs) of the third and fourth worlds, this experience of resurrection in death is frequent. It is what Archbishop Romero alluded to in an interview: «If they kill me, I will rise again in my people». He had no intention of denying the future

resurrection, but rather was anticipating it, for he saw that the resurrection of Christ takes place, as if sacramentally, whenever men and women who are oppressed, maltreated, or negated become truly liberated and humanized.

Accordingly, a true mysticism for “contemplatives in relation” would do well to recall that Christianity is not a religion of death, nor is it a religion of resurrection. Christianity is *a faith of resurrection in death*. In this process death is not properly sought; it is surpassed, as happened with Jesus. Similarly, resurrection is not sought but is given freely and (in any case) hoped for. So it happened also with Jesus.

Finally, in this movement from God glimpsed to God revealed, human beings end up discovering their own impotence. And it is that discovery which helps them relate differently to God, who despite being infinite and beyond all manipulation, never ceases to be their Rock, their Fortress, and their Refuge, as the psalms intone countless times over.

2.3. From the God revealed to rebellious reality

In keeping with the Christian paradox, it is precisely this total reference to God that makes believers use every human means within their reach (analysis, discernment, training, and patience) in order to receive the help of God «who enriches us by his poverty», makes us grow with his weakness, and is with us in his abandonment.¹⁵

In light of this, we need to add to these reflections a third part, which will

help us seek out practical ways and criteria for growth and action in this program of being contemplatives in relation. As I mentioned already, this final section may be also be useful for non-believers who, despite what they think is their lack of faith, may discern something of truth and beauty in what we have so far explained and may also be searching for a certain mystique of human relations.

Nevertheless, in this final part of our booklet, the author should gradually disappear, lowering his voice and becoming ever more invisible. The reason for this is that there are no prefabricated recipes. Each of us has to work toward mastering our own life, learning by ourselves, and finding our own unique path. A discourse which addresses a wide audience can only suggest, not affirm; it can only orient us, not dictate to us. It cannot expound theological systems and constructions; it can only condense or process human experiences.

That is what we will make a modest attempt to do in the next part, but before that, for lack of concrete recipes, we will try to smooth the transition by offering a reflection on love, which seems to be the prototype of all human relations and the peak to which all of them point.

2.4. From reality to the love “which is of God”

We can define love in general terms as *the gift of oneself, made with complete and absolute freedom, for the growth of the other*. That would be the summit of the whole general process of “de-

siring the good of the other”, which culminates in more particularized forms (such as the love of couples and friendship) with the added note of *mutual gift*. Using this definition, we are better able to point out the deficiencies or deformations of love, which are frequent and interminable among us and which we will find in many other relationships as well.

a) We begin with the second characteristic of love, the freedom of the gift. Often the gift is not made “with the fullest freedom”, but for reasons of deceit, seduction, pretended need, etc. Freedom can be falsified in many ways by humans, but this doesn’t mean that we must give up hope of true freedom. Rather we must seek it in ever truer forms.

b) The lack of true freedom in the gift can disfigure the goal of freedom, which is the good of the other. One may give oneself, not for the sake of the other’s growth, but to make the other yield to one’s wishes. Or one may give oneself, but then later send a bill for the gift, calculate the return, etc.

c) These two detours can contribute to a distortion of the noun which defines love: gift. If the source and the goal of the gift are falsified, the gift may be simulated, calculated, short of the just measure, etc. I speak expressly of the “just measure” because naturally we cannot expect a full and absolute gift of self in every human relation –such would be impossible. Only in certain relations (couples, family, or intimate friendship) is it possible for the gift of self to aspire to forms of plenitude. In many other cases, love of neighbor will

simply mean freely desiring his/her growth. Such desire may well require certain levels or gestures of giving, or it may be limited, depending on circumstances, to observing attitudes of profound respect.

In any case, if we prescind for now from the many ways of expressing love practically, this last mentioned form of love (*disinterestedly desiring the good of the other*) provides us a base for the contemplative focus of relation. That base coincides with the classical formula of some mystics: «loving God in all and all in God».

Loving God in one’s neighbors means loving what is best in them, whether that is patent or latent; it means loving in them the presence of God’s Spirit, that which is most intimate to them and most profoundly theirs. Loving others in God means loving them as God loves them: helping them make the best of themselves so that they yield good returns on their divine adoption, synonym of freedom and fraternity.

2.4.1. Possible objection

In this way we overcome a false dilemma which we sometimes hear expressed: «If you love your neighbor for God, then you don’t love him for himself, so that the love is cheapened». Those who argue this way continue to think of God and human beings as being in competition, instead of being in a relation which «impels and enables» (X. Zubiri). We must understand that *loving others for God is the most intense manner of loving them for themselves*, because there is nothing more profoundly and

preciously theirs than God's presence in them. As opposed to what happens in our (less perfect) experience of human love, loving others in God and loving them for themselves are not related in inverse proportion; rather, both of them grow together. When this does not happen (such as when God is *really the only factor* in our relation with the other), then we may suspect that we have not yet attained to genuine loving, but only to "enduring" (or maybe pardoning) the other. This does not happen infrequently in our relations with one another.

Actually, what we have tried to describe is more a model than a reality, but even a tiny dose of insight will make us see how far we are even from the model. Just think of that saying of Jesus: «Be merciful¹⁶ as your heavenly Father is merciful». Thus, if we want to be contemplatives in relation, an indispensable starting point is to pray constantly for something that is so easy to say and so apparently close at hand, but often so far from us: «Teach me to love. Let me learn to love as you love». We can hardly conceive a form of Christian life where this kind of prayer is not offered daily and relentlessly.

Each one of us possesses an impressive variety of registers and keys, and

despite all the traits we have in common with other persons, they constitute for us an immense kaleidoscope of shifting tones which we can never pin down or totally categorize. For that reason the apprenticeship of love requires of us discipline and analysis, for the responsibility of love in human beings is great indeed. Fine sentiments and good will are vitally necessary, but they are not enough. Love implies a personal giving of self. As human persons we are more than will and sentiments: we are also intelligence and so are able to grasp what is real. Passion and discipline are most fruitful when paired together; they can be dangerous when they're divorced.

We therefore feel the need to draw up a little catalogue which analyzes the *proper attitudes* to be sought and the *human types* we might find. These will lead us to ask how God sees the persons we deal with, so that we can then ask ourselves: how should we see those persons and how should we treat them?

We can proceed, then, to the third part of our essay, remembering what we've already said: mechanical recipes are no use here; only orientations can help us. And all of us need to carry out these analyses for ourselves.

3. PRACTICAL ORIENTATIONS

At the level of faith, we have already noted that the attitude we should seek in human relations is the one described by Saint Ignatius: «loving God in all and all in God».

It will be difficult for us to attain that attitude, however, if we do not cultivate a way of looking at *the whole of reality*. Such a way of looking encompasses a profound dialectical theology.

a) Our proposal involves a clear “pan-en-theism”: this word, which should not be confused with pantheism, means that *all things exist and subsist in God*. They therefore do not include God, but neither is God a simple conversation partner or interlocutor, as privileged a one as we may imagine him to be.

b) At the same time, this way of looking involves, if I’m allowed the expression, a clear “theo-en-pasism”, which means *God in all things* (Greek: “Theos en pasi”). This is often forgotten when mention is made of panentheism. God is in the depths of all things, even the tiniest ones. That is why he can become a privileged interlocutor for personal beings.

Rather than a simple interlocutor, God is more like the sea or the atmosphere. Nevertheless, we can and should address him as a conversation partner, recalling the axiom we cited earlier: God cannot be bound by what is greatest, yet he is contained in what is smallest.

This general manner of relating to the world should be cultivated in personal prayer, thus overcoming the notion of God as a particular individual (and therefore limited despite his greatness). Even though we can and should call on God, he is not a particular interlocutor but an oceanic one –he is an ocean to which we can relate personally.

3.1. Background attitudes

Such a global vision of reality unfolds when we draw close to other human beings, adopting other attitudes such as

respect, welcoming, fraternal equality, and willingness to listen.

3.1.1. *Respect*

Foremost is the profound respect that the sacred character of every person should inspire in us. It is a way of opening ourselves up to others which includes all our subsequent reactions.

When we enter a church for reasons other than curiosity or tourism, we are predisposed to be respectful in the quiet, peaceful ambiance which encourages us to pray. Well, that same simple attitude which we have so often adopted mechanically should blossom with each person we meet up with, for each one is a true “temple of God”. John Chrysostom and other Church fathers sometimes chided the faithful with this argument: you worry about covering the walls of the church with fine fabrics or images of Christ. Then, when you go outside, you find a true temple and an image of the Living Christ who is naked in the street... and you walk right by him.

But it is not only the Church fathers who say this. E. Levinas became famous for his profound reflections on “the face”: of all the realities that affect our senses, the face is the only one that is not a mere “phenomenon” (a simple object).¹⁷ More than that, it is *an appeal*, a call to respect, to sustenance, to communion. The face is what is most distinctive about the person.

It may be that in practice that appeal is deceitful (and so love is obliged to be intelligent), but that possible dishonesty does not invalidate the sublime quality of the face: it is the only object which

does not allow me to remain just a subject but which summons me to be an interlocutor and a brother.¹⁸ The face contains a kind of “infinite” which prevents me from trying to capture it and which destroys my pretensions of “totality”. Therefore contemplation of the face transcends the simple *recognition* provided by sight and becomes a *call* which asks to be listened to: «If today you hear his voice, harden not your heart», prayed the psalmist.¹⁹

This is the basic truth of our relational universe, which we should recall and set in motion every morning, much as one turns on a cell phone when getting up. We should ask God to grant us that attitude of almost religious respect toward every “image of God” we meet in the course of the day.

And this fountain of respect for every face we meet will develop in two directions.

3.1.2. *Welcoming*

If previously we spoke of the “face” as the expression of the other person’s appeal, now we can add that the smile is how the face welcomes and expresses the best of human encounter.

The encounter with each person we meet in the course of the day is an encounter with Christ or a «vicar of Christ»²⁰. As an encounter with someone we love, it should produce in us smiles of joy. The gift of the smile reveals a magnanimous frame of mind. We have all experienced how much magnanimity facilitates human relations, how much a kindly smile can change us, how much generous disposi-

tions bring out the best of us in our dealings with others. Years ago I talked about the smile as possibly being a *modern form of holiness*. Of course, we are not talking about all those false, insincere smiles, practiced before a thousand mirrors and aimed simply at selling some product or taking advantage of another person. All that is tragic, but it is also proof of the power of the smile.

The contemplative in relation should strive to be someone who welcomes others with smiling magnanimity. That is why the daily prayer of Christians can never forget to make a twofold petition: for an attitude of respect before the temples of the Spirit I meet this day, and for a disposition which welcomes with a smile the Christs whom I encounter. Saint Alphonsus Rodriguez, for many years the porter at the Jesuit college in Mallorca, is renowned for the exclamation he customarily made whenever he heard someone knocking at the gate: «I'm coming, Lord!». Such was his response, even when he had to drag himself with difficulty toward the gateway, feeble with age and loaded down with heavy keys.

Besides respect and a welcoming attitude, a third petition should permeate Christian prayer and contemplation: an attitude of fraternal closeness to all those brothers and sisters (children of God) who cross our path each day.

3.1.3. Fraternal equality

Briefly, almost in passing, Saint Paul counseled his Christians «to count others as better than yourselves» (Phil 2,3), adding that by doing so they would

have «the same mind as was in Christ Jesus».

If that counsel appears excessive, it will help to reflect that, if we manage to see other as better than ourselves, then we will have a hard time seeing them as equals! It's like the bullet in the joke, which the corporal explained need to be aimed a little above the target since the law of gravity would lower its trajectory (but then he explained that, even if there were no law of gravity, the bullet would still tend to fall «by its own weight»). Perhaps it's our own gravity-bound weight that Saint Paul had before his eyes when he offered this advice. Our neglect of this Pauline counsel perhaps explains the failure or the meager realization of two of modernity's ideals (equality and fraternity). Our reluctance to practice these ideals has helped to falsify, sometimes monstrously, the third: the cry of liberty.

With the help of this Pauline counsel and a bit of Freudian jargon we might say that other persons constitute our "super-ego", not in the psychoanalytic sense of self-regarding conscience, but in the sense of response to the invitation of another's face. We might also say that God becomes the supreme "Id" (capitalized), again not in the Freudian sense of something external to our ego, but in the sense of total objectivity, the "true All" as opposed to our partial, miniscule subjectivities, all of which are false.

Profound respect, welcoming smile, and egalitarian fraternity should all be the first steps in our openness to inter-human relations. Such a global attitude, fully Christian and fully human, should then be molded and woven in quite

diverse ways, according to the endless variety of persons, psychologies, and situations –and according to what we said earlier about the need for analysis and intelligence, even for love.

Achieving a contemplative view of our human relations involves a twofold conviction: *the total immanence of God in his transcendence*, but also *the autonomy of reality*, which requires that these global attitudes become “inculturated” in each individual person and in each concrete relation. The people we meet are not persons in general; they are particular Toms or Sallys or Marys. While some persons will be disarmed by a smile and so won over to a good relationship, others will be more sullen and irascible (as most of us are sometimes); they may be irritated by a smile and will perhaps look down on our simplicity.

3.1.4. Ability to listen

These three attitudes give birth to a fourth, which seems to me basic for relations that are founded on contemplation: the ability to listen. By this term I do not mean listening to someone who needs us and comes looking for counsel or orientation. Doing this may be easier, even though sometimes the interlocutor is difficult to deal with. But what I am referring to now is the ability to hear *the person who disarms us*, the one who removes our securities. This can sometimes be the “work of the evil spirit” (as the spiritual classics warn us), but at other times it can be God knocking at our door in search of us.

When is the latter the case? Precisely when our listening seems to shatter

our sense of security, when fear makes us cover our ears and makes us unable to pay attention. I often say that our need to feel secure is one of the greatest temptations against faith; it can turn faith into pure superstition or fundamentalism. Years ago R. Bultmann wrote, «Christian faith consists in finding security there where security is nowhere in sight»²¹.

There are times in any person’s life when the need for security can be such that for its sake we sacrifice our intelligence, our ability to reason, and our ability to listen. In the face of what might threaten us we have ready-made answers, taken from a manual or a catechism; we put them forth impulsively, without taking time to understand the other person. We give prefabricated answers to every question, without allowing ourselves to be invaded by the question, and much less by what the question reveals to us about the true situation of our interlocutor. This is a characteristic of all groups or movements that are closed in on themselves and tending to sectarianism.

A graphic example of the point I’m making is the Bosnian movie, *In the Road*. Since it treats of Islamic rather than Christian fundamentalism, we can perhaps view it more objectively and not feel threatened by its message. The director of the movie, however, has made it clear that her aim is not to criticize Islam but to say something about human psychology and religion in general. What she wants to say is this: the protagonist of the film, emerging from the catastrophe of war, has lost a sense of meaning in life. As a result he turns to alcohol and ends up losing his

job. Soon after that he falls into the hands of a Muslim group, and the faith of these companions restores to him a sense of peace, security, and confidence... and also frees him from alcohol. Even though this new situation requires him to accept certain customs he would previously have disregarded (such as women covering their faces, etc.), such concessions mean little to him *in view of his regained security*. In the end, this obstinate pursuit of security makes him incapable of listening to and understanding his girlfriend, with whom at the beginning of the film he had a good relationship. For each argument she gives he has a prepared rebuttal, which he takes out of some doctrinal repository and repeats mechanically. He ends up feeling satisfied, but she is on the edge of despair –until the relation breaks off. That is the price of not knowing how to listen, an inability that results from his walling himself off from others for the sake of security.

Of course, we can see immediately that is not true only of the Muslim world. In the Catholic sphere also we find (sometimes among bishops) painful types of fundamentalism which sacrifice all genuine understanding of the surrounding world to the idol of security. Goaded by such idolatry, fundamentalism leads either to a sectarian ghetto or to aggressive violence which seeks to eliminate those who are “other”. Persons who react this way never consider that that troublesome interlocutor is also a creature loved by God, someone who also has questions and desires; not realizing this, they become incapable of listening to others or understanding

them. A more contemplative type of relation would lead them to value confidence in God above their own security and not to confuse the one with the other. Instead, their fear makes them incapable of relating to others; it cuts short the growth they would experience if they invested the talents of their security instead of burying them. Like the apostle Peter, they sink when they realize that they are walking on water because the realization makes them feel insecure. And they merit the same reproach that Peter received from Jesus, «O you of little faith».

If instead they carefully invested their talent, they would reap one of the most rare and valuable of human qualities: the ability to combine great fidelity to one’s own convictions with a commitment to fraternal equality, the ability to embrace what is different.

Having examined these four general attitudes, we now finally undertake an analysis of the variety of human relations. We do so diffidently, as I’ve said already, taking note only of certain examples, without pretending to be exhaustive. We make it clear that, although we may be speaking of others (thus objectifying them), the main difficulty lies rather in the different reactions and responses that occur *in us* with respect to each type of person.

3.2. Variety of persons

3.2.1. «He is with you and you do not recognize him.» *The victims*

The quoted text is from a hymn that Christians have been singing for a long

time, and it is sad but significant that the hymn no longer has a prominent place in our liturgies. The hymn describes a contemplative attitude with respect to those who are victims of the human system: it challenges us to see in them the Christ who «calls to us through the mouths of the hungry» or through the bodies of those who are imprisoned, infirm, or naked»; it summons us to hear and feel in them the cry of God himself.

Here we have an inversion of the initial revelation of the Bible story («I have heard the cry of my people, and I have come down to deliver them»: Ex 3,7.8). Now it is we who are being asked to hear the cry of our God and to make haste to deliver him. That inversion is the fruit of all the work of God in history, a result of the «recapitulation of all things in Christ, who is his Word» (Eph 1,14) and of the «pouring out of his Spirit on all flesh» (Acts 2,17). Thus, when Ignacio Ellacuría views the oppressed masses of El Salvador as the present-day embodiment of the Servant of Yahweh of Isaiah 53, or when he defines them as a “crucified people”, or when the bishops assembled in Puebla speak of the “faces of Christ” to designate the victims of our society (women, unemployed youth, migrants, etc.), they are urging us to relate to those who are marginalized with a truly contemplative attitude.

There is something comprehensible about the fact that many people who call themselves Christians believe that God is being persecuted when a religious building is burned down or an ecclesiastical institution is criticized (both of which of course are the “work of human

hands”), but they do not think the same when a child of God is maltreated or killed. Fortunately that mentality has been changing in recent years. The attitude being proposed here has caught on, or at least is catching on. But there is still the danger that the change is taking place only at a theoretical level. We hear only generic statements about people who are “starving, impoverished, and sickly”; the words remain abstract. The power of contemplation and the meaning of the hymn we quoted are intensified and radicalized when those abstract terms take on a visible face and a specific name, when they cease to be just “a poor woman” or “an unemployed youth” and become instead “poor Susan” or “jobless Samuel”.

Though there is still much more to be said, let us grant this point about society’s victims (the poor, the sick, foreigners, antagonists..., who are perhaps unknown to us but whose reality is immense and undeniable), and let us pass on to other examples: acquaintances, friends, teachers, lovers, saints... What are we to see in each one of them and how? Let us analyze a few examples.

3.2.2. «Neither this man sinned, nor did his parents.» (Jn 9,3) *The sick*

If I truly contemplate a sick person, I will pay more attention to his real suffering than I will to any possible defects of his that would save me from responding to his pain. When encountering the sick, we should put aside all judgment. It’s undoubtedly true that in our eyes there are good and bad patients, and that sickness can make people selfish and erratic. But it is also true, chris-

tologically speaking, that their sickness gives them certain rights when dealing with us healthy people: they have the right not be judged or condemned. Even though, for their own good, they may at times need to be compelled, it must always be done as gently as possible.

Moreover, it is edifying to contemplate the tenderness and patience that sick people, because of their helplessness, sometimes inspire in the nurses, doctors, and others who care for them. These caretakers often display for them their greatest personal treasures, and they do so almost effortlessly, without any need to refer explicitly to Christ or God. Just as «it is the poor who evangelize us», so it is possible that our immersion in the world of the sick can in the course of time help us to change many of the distorted ways we have of seeing things. We begin to ask the true contemplative question, «Why him and not me?», which inverts the spontaneous reaction of our ego: «What have I done to deserve this?»

3.2.3. «With a smile you have spoken my name.» *Gratifying relations*

It is surely true that the greatest happiness that can be had in this world is rooted in human relations which unite us in genuine companionship. But precisely for that reason, we may obsessively pursue that goal to the point of killing the «goose that lays the golden eggs». We may become selfish and destroy the relationship.

Therefore, when life grants us these gifts, we must learn to relish all the gratifying aspects of our relationships of love and friendship. We should cherish such relationships not as something

deserved or acquired, but as profound *experiences of gratuitousness*. Every gratifying relation is a gift for which we should give thanks. It obliges us to give more because we have received more. When these splendid relations are experienced as gratuitous gifts rather than something we deserve, then they turn out to be infinitely more gratifying and less threatened. And they open us up to those countless people whom life has denied even the most elementary love and affection.

Here we need to evoke the mystery of sexual attraction, along with all it means in terms of experience of otherness, promise, and surprise (cf. Gen 2,23ff). Experiencing it in this way engenders respect, amazement, and a sensation of unworthiness. I am speaking of *global* sexual attraction, not just of *bodily* attraction (inseparable from the other but still different from it). The latter can lead us to reduce sexuality to the genital; because of its impulsive nature, it can obscure sexuality and turn communion into possession, otherness into domination, and the mystery of otherness into an object to be consumed.²² What is most gratifying in sexual attraction results perhaps from its being a pale reflection of God himself, whose being consists of giving of self (Father), losing oneself in this giving (Word), and recovering the fullness of one's being in the same giving (Spirit).

3.2.4. «Why do you strike me?» (Jn 18,22) *Ill treatment*

All of us experience moments of humiliation or ill treatment in our lives. It

is not always possible to calculate how much of it is really meant as offense. All of us tend to judge *the intention* of the other person by *the reaction* it provokes in us, but such judgment is mistaken in most cases. For that reason many spiritual guides recommend that we not respond to the disgraces we suffer, even if we think that we are responding «only to defend the truth» and not to justify ourselves. Over the long run many people have learned that the refusal to justify oneself can bring about a sense of peace, which accepts the other person and refers us to the ultimate mystery of a God who is *semper maior* (always greater).

We can then also understand why Ignatius Loyola recommended that we ask in prayer for «humiliations and offenses». This is not a sick sort of masochism which takes delight in one's wounds –Ignatius himself strove to justify what he saw as the truth when the greater good of the Church of the gospel was at stake. Rather it is a difficult road toward tremendous interior freedom, following the dialectic of John of the Cross: «To come to have everything, you have to go to where you have nothing». We also have the example and the fate of Jesus, whom we follow as our sustainer and our strength in these hard times.

3.2.5. «How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?» *Evil people*

Despite all we've said, bad people exist. Evil is like a “genetic” threat which affects all of us. At some point in our life we may come across some of the

scoundrels who populate the planet, or at least some of their works. This is a topic about which it is impossible to make general statements, because it is something like cancer: in each instance it must be determined whether the cancer cells are simply benign, whether the tumor is malignant, how big it is, and whether there is metastasis.

Here I will limit myself to explaining the ideal process, using the story of Zaccheus as narrated by Luke. Zaccheus is a perfect scoundrel who has become extremely rich, and he benefits from a pyramidal structure which channels people's anger more toward his subordinates than toward him. Is this not a pattern that is repeated countless times in human history? There still remains in this man, nonetheless, a tiny opening through which he can be reached. It is perhaps the only case recounted in the gospels where one of Jesus' enemies approaches him out of curiosity rather than aggressivity. Usually Jesus' adversaries attempt to «entrap him in his own words» (Mt 22,15), but in Zaccheus there is that small opening, which becomes his salvation.

The behavior of Jesus toward him is that of a contemplative in relation. He knows that «this man is also a child of Abraham» and that the «the Son of Man has come to save what was lost» (Lk 19,9.10). Zaccheus thus finds himself welcomed in a way he never would have suspected, and that welcome changes him and makes him do things that would have been unthinkable for anyone else of his kind. For God suffers also in the wicked, and in a certain sense more

even than in the victim. That is why God «does not want the death of the sinner but that he be converted and live» (Ez 33,11).

This is an ideal case which does not represent all of them, but it helps to orient them. This case opens up a broad perspective which illuminates many aspects of human justice. For example, our striving for justice often has to do with our seeking the punishment of the offender, but such an attitude makes justice too much like vengeance. Punishment should not be for our own satisfaction but should seek to protect people from possible dangers. Furthermore, true and complete justice consists not so much in the punishment as in the transformation and rehabilitation of the criminal. That is the great difference between human justice and the justice of God, as Karl Barth explained in his commentary on Romans. This is also what has been proposed in many theological declarations about our prisons, which because of inertia and indifference are little heeded.

3.2.6. «The weakness of our neighbor»

In our ordinary relations, most of the people we meet are far from evil, but they can be difficult. We know persons who speak only of themselves and their little battles or their triumphs; we deal with bad-tempered folks who abuse and insult others under the guise of “telling the truth” (confusing the truth with their own adrenaline); and we reckon with authority figures who treat others with arrogance (thinking their harshness a type of responsibility).

These are the most problematic cases for our argument. We will have a hard time reacting to them in a contemplative manner if we have not thought about them before the Lord. We might reflect on such considerations as the following: a) certainly the harm they do themselves by acting thus is greater than any harm they can do to me (and the less they realize how insufferable they are, the more they suffer); b) if something bad affects me much worse than it does others, it is a sign that my own spiritual health is not all that good; c) we are unaware of the secret struggle that many human beings wage with themselves, and if we were aware of it, we would understand them better. In any case, as difficult as they may be, they are also persons from whom may emerge a small work of art, even if this is not made of fine marble but of cheap stone.

3.2.7. «Receive one another as Christ received you.» (Rom 15,7)

Our daily contacts

The previous examples are intense, extreme sketches: either black or white. Most of our contacts, however, are more like the palette of a painter with an infinite range of grays. These are the ordinary people we meet every day, sometimes in passing, sometimes for longer periods, but in relations that are generally not intense or crucial.

In my opinion, those who view every human being in accord with the Pauline command at the head of this section will achieve two things. First, they will inspire confidence in others and not come across as competitors or

dominators. Second, they will not call attention to the defects of others (as a way of feeling superior) nor to their weak points (so as to take advantage of them). Rather they will look on their neighbor as a package of possibilities, some already being tapped, others half-activated, and still others perhaps almost untouched. It is through these that God works and wants to work –with my help.

The effort to be contemplatives in relation will help us to avoid the “original sin” which we tend to introduce into all our relations with others: looking only at the good traits of the other person, so that we end up “falling in love” with a being that does not exist in reality but is only a fiction we have created for ourselves. Or else we look only at the defects of others, filtering out their positive aspects, and so deny our support to those who are perhaps only sad souls like ourselves. This kind of “original sin” sterilizes from the start many of our relationships because we look at others not “with the eyes of God” but with our own unacknowledged myopia.

Trying to be contemplatives in relation will also help us, not only to build the relation on truth, but also to develop relations that are smooth and gentle. True contemplation is that which takes us out of our ego. Applying this to everyday human relations, we are led to refrain from speaking too much and monopolizing the conversation, and when we talk, we avoid talking excessively about ourselves. Consciously or unconsciously, 90% of the times that people speak about themselves, it is to

justify themselves. This need for recognition often leads them to interrupt others or to be antagonistic when they feel others have invaded “their” space (always it’s the “me too”: «I saw that also»; «I was there too...»). Human relations solidify much better when we take care to say what may be useful or agreeable to the other person, and not just what reassures our own ego. But let us be clear: what is spoken has value only when it is spoken spontaneously, not out of some false legal or moral norm which might render us mute or make us sound phony. Such spontaneity can be attained only by changing our interior registers.

Nothing we say here means we should be naïve. Jesus said quite clearly that, besides being as simple as doves, we should be as wily as serpents. This counsel is all the more important in a perverse economic system, built on the categorical imperative of maximum profit, which motivates people to deceive and exploit others and tries to link our economic welfare with our need for affection, probably the worst path for attaining it.

3.2.8. In conclusion

«Whoever does not want the ‘our’ does not want the ‘Father’» (St John of Ávila, commenting on the Our Father).

We could give other examples, but they would be endless. To sum up, let us say simply that we should enter every human relation with questions of this type: what is it in the other person that is God’s gift for me? what does God hope for from the other? how can I

empathize with him (with his pain, with his love,...)? what can I forgive and what do I need to be forgiven? We should carry questions of this sort to our prayer or our meditation every day.

In a word, when in the presence of others, we should ask ourselves how God would treat them so that we can treat them in the same way. But besides that, we should desire that they reflect as much as possible the image of God which makes them what they are, but which at the same time is obscured in them, as in all of us.

We have traced here a series of attitudes which can be summed up in two phrases: seeking God in others (such that God is more an appeal than an “object”) and seeing others from God’s point of view (as a field of open possibilities rather than a circumscribed object). That is what it means to be a contemplative in relation. We can now proceed to describe some sources (or terrains) that will help these attitudes to grow.

3.3. Calling on God as mother

Addressing God as feminine can give those of us who are males easy access to God’s otherness. But there is something even more profound in God’s maternity.

Indeed, one of the deepest needs we human beings have (given our need for recognition) is being able to say that our lives have been desired and loved by somebody, that they are not the result of mere accident. We torture ourselves with the question: are we only a chance

combination of particles, like the shapes of clouds in the sky which are constantly changing? Every human being wants to know, and needs to know, that his life is something more than that. Psychologists tell us how difficult it is for neglected individuals, those who feel from early on that no one is interested in them, to mature as persons and become capable of human relations.

Precisely for that reason, the expression «son of a bitch» [in Spanish, «son of a whore»] has become the worst, most offensive insult that we can inflict on another person; it is nastiest invective we can use when we feel the need for vengeance. It’s like telling the other person that his life is not worth anything to anybody, that no one ever really wanted him to exist.²³ Every human being may be tempted to feel this way, that their lives are due to mere chance and do not correspond to anybody’s express desire that they exist. Well, the Good News of Christian faith denies categorically that our existence is meaningless and affirms unreservedly that someone did indeed love us into existence. Calling on God as mother, then, expresses the grateful confidence we have in the embrace we have felt even before we came into being. Such confidence strengthens and dignifies our consciousness of being and makes us capable of relationship.

Furthermore, our recourse to God as mother opens our eyes to a God who (like the mother in a family) is the prototype of reconciliation and the model of a more contemplative way of viewing all the family’s members. In family relations the mother is the one who

promotes peace, eases tense relations (“consider your brother...”; “remember your father...”, etc.). Calling on God as mother can therefore be a simple way of predisposing ourselves for more conciliatory relations. The phrase of John of Ávila we just cited («if there is no *our*; then there is no *Father*») gains in intensity if we are convinced that, unless God is the mother of all, then she is not my mother either.

From this perspective, I would like to express my dismay at the assurance with which J. Ratzinger in his book on Jesus denies that we can address God as Mother. (I take advantage of the fact that in the book he claims to be speaking not as pope but as a theologian willing to have his colleagues dispute him). Ratzinger argues that in the Bible «Mother is never a title of God», that the biblical authors invoke God only as Father, and that the maternal references are found only in descriptive images.²⁴ I fear that Ratzinger has here taken the biblical language out of context, falling into an error which Xavier Alegre ingeniously describes thus: «a text without context becomes a pretext». The Bible avoids addressing God as feminine because *in that historical ambiance* the “goddesses” were worshipped in a context either of sacred prostitution or of fertility cults.²⁵ Naturally neither of these contexts was admissible for monotheistic Jews who considered God transcendent. Nowadays, however, those contexts do not apply.

In summary, the feminine epitomizes what it is to be human much more than the masculine does, especially in

one decisive factor which could be a dim analogy of our relation with God: *being indebted to him for our being*. For that reason also the feminine more easily brings together and unifies all human beings as brothers and sisters. When we come face to face with all the different character types described in the earlier section, our viewing each of them as born of the same Mother as ourselves will help us change our attitude toward them if a change is needed.

3.4. Treasuring in the heart

But such attitudes are not improvised. We have to keep warming ourselves every day in the “*baño de María*” [double boiler] of our prayer. We use the expression *baño de María* intentionally because it allows us to make a surprising lyric leap.

With a certain simplicity, John Henry Newman wrote, in his essay on the development of dogma, that Mary of Nazareth should be the model for theologians, because almost the only thing the gospel tells us about her is that «she treasured up all these things, pondering in her heart what they might mean». According to Newman, that should be the attitude of the theologian, and I believe it should be the attitude of every Christian at the moment of forging relations with one’s brothers and sisters.

We might well add that the evangelist Luke applies this phrase to Mary in two contrasting moments (Lk 2.19, 2.51). The first is a moment of joy and celebration, when the shepherds visit

the manger in the middle of the night. The second moment is one of sadness and distress, when the child Jesus is lost (though there is also the positive side of the teachers' reaction to this extraordinary lad). This ability to treasure mysteries and ponder their meaning seems to me to be an indispensable part of becoming a contemplative in relation. It involves assimilating and making part of our own being whatever is most promising and positive in every relation; it means processing and eliminating whatever is negative, without making it into the only (sometimes obsessive) feature of our memories.

3.5. Thinking peacefully about death every day

In our times there is a great deal written, spoken, and advertised about happiness, as we will see in the conclusion. And the truth is that our happiness seems to have a lot to do with the quality of our human relations. This reveals to us a new paradox, namely, that thinking frequently and tranquilly about death helps us not to lose or squander the little happiness available to us here (those experiences of peace and meaning we already spoke of). This is so for several reasons. First, because such reflection can prevent us from doing stupid things that will only makes us miserable. Even if that saying of Nietzsche's Zarathustra were true, «Every pleasure seeks eternity», it is good to know that we cannot ask him for it. Second, because it shows us how best to invest the capital of life which remains in our account. But thirdly and above all, because it helps us think of

death not as defeat but as goal, not as parting but as birth, not as motive of grief but as reason for trust. As Leopoldo Panero put it in his intuitive verse: «I look at you and I think about things / that never come to an end / because God has watched them / and cannot forget them... / One night we will shut / our eyes. The rest / belongs to wind and foam / but love will live on.»²⁶

Since this is true, we are well advised not to lose our relations with our departed loved ones, or our consciousness of their presence in absence. We should trust that they have not been left at the wayside of history but have already arrived at the goal, where they await us. We should recall the inspiring examples they were to us in their lives. We may imagine having dialogues with them, we may present them flowers and other things they do not need, or we may visit cemeteries where they are not to be found and where we might rather hear the voice of the angel in the gospels: «Why do you seek the living among the dead?» Instead of all these vain attempts, we should evoke them as our intercessors before the mystery of God, and we should trust in the possibility—for believers, the certainty—of being transformed in our re-encounter with them some day. Thus it will not be the sad story of those times «which passed in joy and will not return», but the reverse: they will return, but freed of all that was false in them and loaded down with all the love we were able to bestow on them.

That hope-filled love allows us to imagine our departed loved ones (spouse, parents, brothers, sisters,

friends,...) in that “portion of God” (as it were) where they now live and where they become for us (like God) a “presence in absence”. We realize that even now they are what Saint Irenaeus in the second century called «resplendent flesh», surpassing the opaqueness of our earthly flesh. Their flesh is resplendent like *the Father* because it is «possessed by *the Spirit* of God», which shapes it into *the Word* of God. For that reason they are that «flesh forgetful of itself» which becomes «resplendent»²⁷.

Our departed loved ones have come to form part of the divine Trinity which, at the end of time, ceases to be Trinity and becomes «divine multiplicity» in that sort of biblical pantheism where «God becomes all in all». At that moment, the relation that started out with our being “separate entities” becomes a “subsistent” relation, like the divine persons, so that the trajectory of our creaturehood culminates in the

fullness of the “divine image and likeness”. That goal, which is our truth, must even today illuminate all our relations in the creaturely dimension, changing them into small sacraments or signs of our being all together in God (in technical theological language: of our “circumincession” in God). In this way we open ourselves in silent surprise before the final mystery of Christianity, which is the mystery of the “communion of saints” (or better: “the communion of what is Holy”).

Living in this way facilitates greatly the relations we are forging with those who are still alive. It can help us avoid what so often happens: when someone we love dies, we often feel regret that we failed to treat her better or recognized her gifts while she was still with us. Instead, we will be encouraged to view and to treat all persons as we would wish we had treated them before they died –or before we do.

CONCLUSION

To sum up rapidly, let us say that we have seen the roots of what in the Christian sources is presented as the call to be «contemplatives in relation». We have situated the results in the context of traditional religiosity and a generalized idea of God, and these have been “turned upside down” by the results. From the start of my theological reflections, I have been arguing that Christianity is founded not on the substitution of God by humans but on the sustenance of humans by God.

We have also discovered how humanly rich our theme is: it contains a wealth that is accessible to everyone, even though it originates from Christian roots, that is, from our understanding of human beings as “images of God” who are “recapitulated in Christ”. And we have tried to get an idea of how to reach this difficult goal, starting from our plain and simple everyday existence.

We can now end these reflections by referring again to a reality very characteristic of our times: people are searching for happiness, looking for recipes that will make them happy, buying “best-sellers” that are successful because they offer formulas for happiness.

Regarding this craze to find happiness, which I find a bit ridiculous, I have elsewhere made these observations:

- a) It is a clear symptom of how unhappy we really are, despite our feeling obliged to tell people we are happy, whether out of human respect or because of the cultural context.
- b) Happiness is one of those human qualities which is found (in whatever measure possible) only when it is not sought.
- c) Happiness does not belong to this dimension in which we exist except in some “sacramental” way. We will never have here an perennial orgasm or an eternal ecstasy. But we do have experiences of peace and meaning, and we catch glimpses of plenitude which can connect us

to a “beyond” in which those experiences seem to participate. And perhaps the most wonderful of these glimpses is this: in a profound experience of communion, one experiences, paradoxically, the greatest affirmation of oneself. But now the “self-affirmation” is an “added extra”, not something sought after or even savored selfishly as such, but simply received, once we realize that nothing more is needed.

And d) in this life, the happiness we have must coexist with a certain unavoidable pain, since we are aware of how many others are suffering at the same time that we are doing well. We all have to accept the great dilemma Albert Camus left us: in a city affected by the plague, either everybody can be happy, or else I cannot be.

In this context, then, we can conclude with this thesis (or at least suspicion): our truly being “contemplatives in relation” can be one of the surest sources of that relative happiness which is the destiny of our temporal dimension.

1. «Quaere super nos», *Confessions* 10,9.
2. Authors who once defended this letter as written by Paul (e.g., Schlier) referred precisely to this allusion to personal experiences. Nowadays it is rather thought that Ephesians is not from Paul's hand. Even if we accept this for reasons of language and style (just as a text of Delibes can be distinguished from one of García Márquez), it is quite likely that the so-called deuter-Pauline letters contain direct teachings of Paul, which were written down by some disciple, who later gave them epistolary form and blended them with some thoughts of his own. What is undeniable is that in this text someone is speaking in a very direct and personal manner. For the rest, I leave the question to the bible scholars.
3. José I. GONZÁLEZ FAUS, *La Humanidad Nueva. Ensayo de cristología*, Santander, Sal Terrae, 1994, p. 278.
4. Egede VAN BROECKHOVEN, *Diario de la amistad*, XXVI, 32:367 and XXV, 85:536 (the figures indicate: notebook, commentary number, and page). The diary has been translated into Spanish, with an excellent introduction, by J. M. RAMBLA (*Dios, la amistad y los pobres*; Santander, Sal Terrae, 2009). Egede explains that he went to work in the factory not to gain more knowledge but to «enter into the life of the people: out of a contemplative attitude, to place myself alongside them, in the hope that they might thus find God in me» (XII, 20:160). He therefore writes that for him «the leap to this environment is like the leap to being a Carthusian or a Trappist» (XXVI, 50:375) and that «this de-Christianized environment, harshly exhausting and brutalizing, is where I find my setting for a contemplative life» (XXII: 154).
5. See the anecdote in J. M. JAVIERRE, *Juan de la Cruz. Un caso límite*, Salamanca, Sígueme, 1991, p. 1062. The response is similar to one John gave a nun who was grieved because he was being exiled to La Peñuela: «My daughter, I am more at home among rocks than I am among men.» (a G. BRENAN, *San Juan de la Cruz*, Barcelona, Plaza&Janés, 1974, p. 93: “men” seems to be a discreet allusion to N. Doria and his faction.)
6. See for example: D. EDWARDS, *El Dios de la evolución*, Santander, Sal Terrae, 2006, pp. 34-35.
7. For all of this see: C. DOMÍNGUEZ, *Los registros del deseo*, Bilbao, Desclee de Brouwer, 2001, especially chapters 4 and 5.
8. Jacques LECLERQ, *El matrimonio cristiano*, Madrid, ed. Patmos, 1952³, (my emphasis).
9. From the Greek verb *askeô*, which means “model”.
10. BROECKHOVEN, *Diario...*, XIII, 2, 7.
11. From the poem, «The sky which is blue» of *Cántico...* But the poet also know that “this world of humans is badly made”.
12. This triad is surprisingly similar to a trinitarian schema in Hinduism: *sat-cit-ananda*: being, consciousness of being, and joy at being.
13. *Non coerceri máximo, contineri tamen a minimo, divinum est.*
14. See her diary: Etty HILLESUM, *Una vida comocionada*, Barcelona, Anthropos, 2007; and my commentary: *Etty Hillesum. Una vida que interpela*, Santander, Sal Terrae, 2008; where there is an analysis of the expression, «helping God».
15. The quoted phrase is from 2 Cor 8,9. The other expressions are from Dietrich Bonhoeffer.
16. «Be perfect», according the version of Matthew 5,48.
17. In philosophical language, a phenomenon is that which appears to us (from the Greek verb *phainomai*, appear), without considering the reality underlying the appearance.
18. Given the date when I am editing this page, it's hard to avoid mentioning the gross falsification of the face's value as seen in the polished, subtly fraudulent posters of our electoral campaigns (and almost all advertising, for that matter). In the posters there is not even the “trace of the face”: the face has lost its appearance.

ling quality and has been degraded by the manipulation and objectification of those who falsify it. The posters are symptomatic of what has become of our democracy. Despite this, or maybe because of it, not even times of serious economic crisis discourage people from investing in their faces.

19. Cf. E. LÉVINAS, *Totalidad e infinito*, Salamanca, Sígueme, 1977.
20. The expression «vicars of Christ» indicated in the early Middle Ages an encounter with someone different, mainly poor people. Later, unfortunately, the popes reserved the title for themselves.
21. R. BULTMANN, *Jesus Christ and mythology*, London, 1966, pp. 39-41.
22. Writing these lines in the centennial year of the great poet Luis Rosales, I dare to quote these verses of his, precisely because they do not come from any celibate ecclesiastical authority: «You know that orgasm is an autism / which lover and beloved have / and you feel their participant terror / which makes you slide toward yourself. / I give what I have and what I am / I'm not sure whether I really let go / maybe I have never given what is mine» (Luis ROSALES, *Poesía reunida*, Barcelona, Seix Barral, 1983, p. 85).
23. This is true despite the fact that the insult is intolerably chauvinist; a more sensitive version might be formulated as «son of a whore's client». The sense is that the life that came forth was in no way desired.
24. See pages 132-33 of the Catalanian edition.
25. Ratzinger referred explicitly to sacred prostitution in his first encyclical.
26. Leopoldo PANERO, *Escrito a cada instante*, Madrid, 1963, 142-43. Also, in the Catalanian language, the magnificent M. MARTÍ POL, *Llibre d'absències*, Barcelona, ed. Empúries, 1997, especially the «Lletra a Dolors» (p. 23).
27. *Adv. Haer.* IV, 20, 2 and V, 9, 3. Elsewhere Irenaeus says that the human person must cease being a creature in order to become a "likeness" (in Greek, progenies, which is the same term he applies to the Son of God).