



## TO SERVE

### for a spirituality of the fight for justice in the “canticles of the servant” of Isaias

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#### Notes

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*“Let us take fresh root  
in fields and lanes to be able to live  
times which bring in their entrails  
the great utopia of brotherhood”.*

***José Antonio Labordeta***

## **INTRODUCTION: TO LIVE TOGETHER, TO LIVE BADLY, TO LIVE INTENSELY FOR, TO SING**

The title of this Booklet may not sound very attractive perhaps. What we all want today, what, unconsciously, makes us vibrate to the thousand stimuli that shape our surroundings (politics, sport, communication media, diverse stars...) is not the will *to serve* but the will to POWER. At the most, we could accept in theory that it be simply the will to *live together*. Nothing more.

However, the craving for power makes the powerful person its slave; and makes two thirds of humanity live very badly [mal-vivir]. And, in this situation in which so many live so badly, it ends up becoming necessary that some have to “bend backwards” [des-vivirse] to bring about that all be able to live together [con-vivir].

Living intensely for a cause (and also an appeal to live so) has found its expression in universal literature in numerous songs and epics that have called attention to and protested the unjust situation of the world's condemned.

For example, the so-called “negro spirituals” not only contain songs and lyrics of immense beauty but have also succeeded in recording the memory of one of the atrocious cruelties of human history. Towards the end of the sixties, the voice of Joan Baez and the figure of M. Luther King caused a stir and led to those never-ending marches of demonstrators singing “We shall overcome”, “I do believe”....

With a similar intention, revolving around a figure known as “The Servant of Yahweh” appear in the Bible some famous poems of a prophet and a poet called “Deuteroisaias” The second part of the book of Isaias (Ch. 40-55) is called Deuteroisaias (or Second Isaias). It does not appear to be written by Isaias himself (as it was composed during the period of exile) but by one of the disciples of his school<sup>1</sup>

The present Booklet aims at being a short commentary on these poems. Apart from the authority that they may have for a believer, for an unbeliever too they could be an example of those spurts of beauty, protest and liberating mysticism that mark the best pages of human history. He could read them as an example of what the verses of G. Celaya request: *Poetry for the people*, poetry as necessary as the bread we eat, the air I breathe twenty times a minute... Because we live by force, because we are hardly allowed to say who we are, *our singers cannot be, without sin, an ornament*... Because something like that poetry were often the prophets of Israel.

### **The poems of the Servant**

Historical criticism believes it has discovered four autonomous canticles in Deuteroisaias, which have been inserted without any solution of continuity in the current text. This hypothesis, put forward by B. Duhm in 1892, has met with general acceptance, so these texts are now universally known as the “Canticles of the Servant”. We have to leave aside here

how the specialists re-order the text of Isaias (in which there is no agreement). In this Booklet we will confine ourselves to these four poems, which are found in chapters 42 (vs. 1-9); 49 (1-7 or perhaps 13); 50 (4-9) and finally in chapter 53 (preceded by the three last verses (13-15 of Ch. 52).

With the subject matter alone (“Servant of God), we are told in the first place that service –for a believer– is truly a vocation from God. We are told, besides, that only he who tries to serve, can help free himself from slavery; that life together and freedom –targets we aim at– are achieved only by passing from slavery to service. And from this readiness to serve spring amiability and conviviality that we try to obtain unsuccessfully through other ways.

We will transcribe the text of each of these poems at the beginning of the chapter that comments on them. For the moment, let us just say that the first canticle seems to deal with the mission of the Servant. The subject matter of the second is his vocation. In the third the theme of suffering and patience is insinuated. And the fourth is subtitled by many scholars as *passion and glory* of the Servant. After the commentary on the poems, we will add a chapter on their focus on the figure of Jesus of Nazareth and His presence in the New Testament. Finally with all these data, we will close the Booklet with some spiritual reflections for the fight today for justice.

Before we begin the commentary on each poem, permit us to transplant and set the subject matter of the poems to our mentality and current situation. For this we will re-title the poems as follows:

- Canticle One: the “modern” Servant.
- Canticle Two: mission, crisis and vocation.
- Canticle Three: the “post-modern” Servant.
- Canticle Four: redemption through dedication

In this way, it will stand out that the four poems of the Servant *have a certain unity and trace a trajectory* or an evolution that is skilfully suggested by the text since each canticle has a sentence that gives a hint about the theme of the following canticle. An evolution of this type is besides easily recognisable in many of our current trajectories.

The reader, be he a believer or not, can easily have access to the human aspect of this trajectory if he sets the first three canticles in the process that is depicted by the following two songs of José A. Labordeta. The painful steps he begins taking while singing: “*There will be a day in which all, on raising their eyes, will see a land showing Freedom*”..., end eventually in those sublime verses: “*We are like those old trees beaten by the wind that whips across from the sea. We have lost our companions, landscapes and hopes in our journey*”...

I would recommend the reader to re-read the words of these two songs, before commencing the Booklet. And also, before reading the last of those four canticles of Deuteroisaias, he should go over those other words of a lay prophet of our Modernity:

“The positive possibility of emancipation resides in... a class with radical chains. a field which possesses a universal character due to its sufferings being universal and which does not claim any special right for itself because no special harm is committed against it, other than harm, pure and simple; unable to invoke a historic title, it can only invoke a human one... that is, in short, *the total loss of man* and

therefore, can only overcome itself by means of *the total recovery of man.*” (K. Marx, *Contribution to the criticism of the right of Hegel*).

It is not a question here of discussing whether Marx being Jewish had read Isaias or not. Rather it is about having the courage to contemplate the very hard reverse side of the very evident tapestry of our humanity, of our history and of our progress.

We shall now comment on each one of the Canticles. The reader should have before his eyes the text of each poem (maybe a photocopy), side by side with the commentary. If he cannot do this, then perhaps it may be better he starts this Booklet reading Chapter 6 and then passes on to the analytic commentary of the poems.

# 1. FIRST CANTICLE: THE “MODERN” SERVANT

## 1. Text of the poem (Is. 42)

1. *Behold my Servant who I sustain, my chosen one who I prefer.  
On him I have bestowed my spirit, in order that he bring the right to nations.*
2. *He will not shout, nor yell, nor cry out in the streets  
He will not break the cracked reed, nor extinguish the flickering wick.*
3. *He will faithfully promote right, without vacillating nor breaking down*
4. *Until he implants justice on earth.  
In his law will wait even the islands.*
  
5. *So says the Lord God, who created and laid out the heavens,  
who consolidated the earth with its vegetation,  
who gave a respite to the people that inhabit it and encouragement to those who move in it:*
6. *I, the Lord, have called you justly<sup>2</sup>; I have caught you by the hand,  
I have formed you, making you the alliance of a people and the light of nations.*
7. *In order that you open the eyes of the blind, lead captives out of prison, and out of the  
dungeon those who live in darkness.*
8. *I am the Lord, this is my Name<sup>3</sup>;  
I do not cede my glory to any other, nor my honour to idols.*
9. *The old has already passed and now I announce something new:  
before it springs up I will let you hear it.*

Let us dedicate a few moments to appreciate the beauty of the poem, remembering, e.g. the verses of G. Celaya quoted in the Introduction, and repeated so often in the years of our passed “modernity. On re-reading it, it will be easier to capture the pattern we are now going to outline.

## 2. Structure of the poem

What first stands out is that this Canticle consists of two parts (A and B) which we have pointed out when transcribing it, leaving an extra space between lines. In the whole poem it is God who speaks. But in Part A *He addresses everybody*, whereas in B *He speaks to His Servant*. In both Parts a circular pattern is followed, which is very much the custom of Biblical literature and it can be represented in the following way:

<u>part A</u>	<u>part B</u>
Identity of the Servant (verse 1a)	Identity of God (v. 5)
Mission (v. 1b)	Mission (v. 6a)
Mode of the mission (v. 2)	Mode of the mission (v. 6b)
Mission (v. 3)	Mission (v. 7)
Identity of the Servant: fidelity (v. 3b.4)	Identity of God (vs. 8-9) <sup>4</sup>

### 3. Commentary on the poem

#### 3.1. *The mission of the Servant*

a) On presenting the Servant, God begins *revealing something of Himself*. He manifests what is His pleasure (the figure and the mission of the servant) and what is His work (sustain him and give him the Spirit). We have entitled this in the pattern as the “identity of God”.

b) This mission of the Servant, which constitutes the pleasure of the Lord, consists in *implanting justice* on earth. The text in Hebrew does not speak of “justice” but of “right”, a word which appears in vs. 1, 3 and 4, and which alludes to the materialisation or “positivisation” of justice (a different word that appears in v. 6). In modern terms, we would say that it is not only about “personal” justice but “structural” justice. In the parallel verse of the second part of the poem, that justice is described as “the opening the eyes of the blind, leading captives out of prison and out of the dungeon those who live in darkness”. The poem alludes to a double captivity which consists in the loss of light and the loss of liberty. The loss of light can be personal (“the blind”) or social (“the darkness as their dwelling place”). The loss of freedom is the result of that loss of light and in the Bible, its recovery is often expressed by an allusion to getting out of prison (cf. e.g. Is. 61, 1c), not only on account of what we imagine how the old prisons were, but also on account of the terrible old treatment meted out to deported people and captives. The mission of the Servant consists in that liberating justice.

c) Finally, this mission is presented in the second part of the poem as a *continuation of the creative work of God*. The God Who sends His Servant to lead men out of prison (physical, mental or social) is He Who created the heavens, consolidated the earth and gave life to those who inhabit it”. Justice is presented as the association of man to the creative work of God, and in continuity with the same. It is not to be forgotten that Deuterocanonicals is the theologian of creation and, what is more, of creation conceived as *history*.

#### 3.2. *The mode of the mission*

a) This fight for justice has a central “style” which, we can describe as the style of God. It is carried out without much fuss and bother, making use of the little that there is already, (the cracked reed and the flickering wick: v. 2), and through a decided fidelity (v. 3). In a word: it is a patient and non-violent fight for justice; and in this is reflected the style of God (see in v. 6: “caught by the hand”). Although we have entitled this canticle alluding to “modernity”, on account of its grandiose ambition, one must acknowledge that the characteristic traced out is very different from that violent and crushing modernity of big words which instead of justice and liberation ends by bringing more injustice and less freedom.

b) By the parallelism with the second part of the poem, it must be said that this style in the fight for justice is what converts the Servant into an “alliance of a people and the light of nations”. The designations seem to be chosen intentionally: the mission of the Servant is directed primarily to the People of God, to that what later will be called by Jesus “the lost sheep of the house of Israel”. But *precisely there*, in the creation of a people without anybody being left out, the mission of the Servant turns out to be universal because it converts the people of the Alliance into testimony or an alternative for all peoples: into the “light” of nations (v. 6).

### ***3.3. Revelation of God***

We have already said that the identity of God began to unveil itself by the fact that *His satisfaction and His work are in this mission of the Servant*. Verse 6 will speak of a “call”, anticipating the theme of the following Canticle, which will be the vocation. The end of the poem will underline that identity with the allusion to the divine “Name” (or truth of being) that God did not wish to reveal to Moses. The evasive “I am who I am” of the Exodus, seems to get a little more concrete here, through that very biblical term “glory” which is very revealing of Yahweh: the glory of God consists in that form of fighting for justice. And in this point God does become “jealous”: He does not concede that glory to anybody because in reality idols do not mete out justice nor implant law nor give freedom. When centuries later St. Ireneus wrote: “the glory of God is man alive”, his words have a precedent which can be reformulated in the following way: “the glory of God is justice among human beings”.



## 2. SECOND CANTICLE: SERVICE AS VOCATION

### 1. Text of the poem (Is. 49)\*

1. Islands, listen to me, distant lands, pay attention:

4. I was thinking: "I have tired myself out in vain  
and have spent my energies in the winds for nothing".

And nevertheless, the Lord has defended my cause  
And God has kept my salary.

1b. I was in the womb when the Lord called me,  
in the maternal entrails, He pronounced my name.

2. He made my mouth a sharp sword and He hid me in the shadow of His hand.  
He made of me a burnished arrow and kept me in His quiver.

3. And He said to me: "You are My Servant (Israel)<sup>5</sup>, and I am proud of you".

5. And now speaks the Lord that, from the womb itself He formed me as His servant  
so that I should return Him to Jacob and reunite Him to Israel.

6. "It is little that you be My servant and you re-establish the tribes of Jacob,  
or convert the survivors of Israel;

I am going to make you the light of nations,  
so that My salvation reaches the confines of the earth".

5c. (up to this point the Lord honoured me and my God was my strength)<sup>6</sup>.

7. So says the responsible<sup>7</sup> and holy Lord of Israel,

to the despised and hated of nations, and the slave of tyrants:

"Kings will see you and rise and princes will prostrate themselves

because the Lord is faithful, and the Holy One of Israel has chosen you".

### 2. Structure of the poem

The hinge of the whole of this poem appears to be verse 4 (for this reason its position has been brought forward in our transcription), that announces also something of the situation that the third canticle will describe, and which, in this dialectic of "crisis-vocation", forms part of the many autobiographical accounts of the prophets of Israel<sup>8</sup>. It can be said that this "crisis" is the only *autobiographical* datum of the canticles of the Servant, which will be taken up again in the following poem.

As in the earlier poem, this also consists of two parts: in the first, the Servant speaks and in the second the Lord speaks. Besides, the poem takes up again topics of the previous canticle: the mission of the Servant is extended up to its origin in the vocation of God, and extended also in its target: up to the confines of the earth". The beginning of verse 6 seems in addition to be a clear allusion to the return from exile. Finally the poem announces themes of the canticles that follow (the whole of v. 7 appears an anticipation of the fourth Canticle). But in the whole of this thematic range, it is easy to identify a *triple motive* that repeats itself

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\* N.B. When transcribing the text I have changed a little the order of the verses for purposes of facilitating their commentary. Attention then to the numeration.

in the two parts of the poem: a) *the call* “from the maternal womb” (vs. 1b and 5), b) *the mission* of the Servant, that in the first part describes further his style (v. 2: “sharp sword and burnished arrow”) and in the second his target (v. 6: conversion-reunification of the people and salvation of the whole world). And c) what these considerations suppose in *the crisis* of the mission (vs. 4 and 7).

Finally, it is open to discussion whether vs. 8-13 belong or not to this Canticle (when other passages are inserted in the biblical text it is easy to decide where the addition begins but not so easy to elucidate where it ends, on account of the perfect blend of the addition with the text). In our commentary we will make an allusion to these verses, though we have refrained from translating them.

### 3. Content of the poem

1) Given its importance in the analysis we have made let us begin this commentary with the autobiographical datum of the crisis of the Servant. The poem is written in moments when its author feels that he has spent his life in vain, and has wasted his energies “running after the wind”. An expression which Ecclesiastes is very fond of, but which this sceptic will apply to the egoistic ambitions of self-aggrandisement. Here, however, we see it applied to the disinterested effort of fighting for justice. And one must not think that the sensation of failure is due only to that frequent corruption which results when men convert the “kingdom of God” into our own kingdom or the justice of God into my own justice. The crisis arises rather from *the crucified nature of a mission as that of the Servant of Yahweh*.

2) Precisely on account of this, the prophet gets out of the crisis discovering that his fight is not his task or personal mania but the vocation of God. A characteristic which in the earlier poem had only been evoked in passing is expanded here –be it noted– with the most solemn words and register of the biblical experience: the solemn tone is perceived in that the beginning of the Canticle (“islands, listen to me etc”) seem to be proper of what is usually called “a royal oracle”. But who speaks now is not a king, but a man in a dark night.

3) The solemn words are the reference to the *gestation* in the maternal womb, and “the *name*” of the Servant. In the same way as in the maternal womb something was being gestated that the prophet was unable to know, but was the basis of his later self-consciousness, so also God was gestating there that figure of the Servant that He wanted to carve out for Himself. And that figure has a name that only God pronounces and which is not a conventional name by which we distinguish each human being, but *the human truth that God expects from people when He calls them*. Extending this consideration, we can see this new “name” of the Servant in the fact of being a “sharp sword in the hand of the Lord, and a burnished arrow in His quiver” (v. 2). Both expressions do not allude to physical violence of arms but to the fact of “being in the hands” of God which makes the Servant “stubborn” and persevering in his journey.

4) The vocation of the Servant being re-affirmed, the Lord speaks to confirm that He alone is the One who calls. The poem collects here other formulations of the previous canticle (“alliance-light”) so as to present them as an intensification of the vocation made in a moment of doubt (“it is little that you be... I make you”), and which turns universal.

5) Indeed: in the initial stage, the vocation is addressed to the people of the Alliance: bring them, reunite them, re-establish them, convert the survivors... (vs. 5-6, where there is now a

very clear allusion to the return from exile). But, availing ourselves of the ambiguity of the verb in Hebrew *shub* (return/convert oneself), this return from exile converts itself into the first step of a conversion to God. The mission of the Servant affects the situation of exile and the sin of the people (symbolised in the former).

We have already said at a second stage, that that mission seems insufficient and gets universal: it is converted into a platform of another mission: being the light of nations “in order that my salvation reaches the confines of the earth”. The novelty of this expansion is double: a) it is one of the few oracles of the prophets regarding Gentiles that are not oracles of reprehension or threat, but of salvation. And b) the light of nations is now no longer the Servant but *the whole restored people*: a jump is given from the personal to the collective, that we will find again when speaking of the identification of the Servant. It is necessary to make a current application of these words: the definition of the Church as “the light of nations” (given by Vatican II, and which originates from texts like this one), implies that the Church is a congregated and converted “people-servant”: if it aspires to be a “people-lord”, that “excommunicates” and that lives turned towards itself and not towards the kingdom of God, the Church is radically betraying its mission. And something of this is happening today.

6) Finally, this suggested step from the personal to the collective seems to be maintained in the last verse of the poem (which we have already said pre-announces themes of the fourth Canticle): “the despised, hated of nations and the slave of tyrants” is *the people of exiled Israel*. Of this crucified people, it is said that the powers of the earth will end up prostrating themselves before them and that *precisely in this*, will the Lord be lord. The fidelity of God is a component of His choice (St. Paul will remind us of this in his letter to the Romans when speaking about the Jewish people). And this allusion to the choice combines with the first verses of each part (1b and 5), closing in this way the poem.

7) Although I doubt the following five verses belong to the poem (it would be more probable if it was only about vs. 8 and 9), we could regard them as a commentary on the poem, that takes up again this extension of the mission of the Servant to all the people. The “alliance of the people” consists in restoring the country and sharing devastated country estates (v. 8 where the allusion to the return from exile is even clearer). But, whenever God chooses a people, He does so to convert them into the *light of all peoples*. To this end follows the double exhortation (v. 9): “say to the captives (= to the Jews): “go out”, and to those who are in the dark (= to the pagans): “come to the light”. Again: only a people who really are a *people of God* can be light for the world. Not a presumed “sacred power” that –as such– arrogates the capacity of speaking in the name of God. If the first exists, then the superabundance alluded to in the following verses (“they will not suffer from hunger or thirst... I will convert the mountains into paths”...) will be granted in “addition”. But if this does not exist, the abundance will only carry on being the source of greater inequalities and greater captivities. The reigns of the earth (which tend to consider themselves as peoples chosen by God) should never forget this. All this is what the Servant has been reflecting upon about his vocation in his first moments of crisis. Despite the difficulties he emerges from it reassured that God has decided to call him, help him and constitute him as the alliance of a people and as the light of other peoples.

### 3. THIRD CANTICLE: THE “POSTMODERN SERVANT”

The reflection of the second Canticle has strengthened the Servant but not for that has it changed the opacity of external reality. Love –said St. Thomas– does not change the difficulty of things, but it does give more strength. Something of this we are going to find in this new Canticle.

#### 1. Text of the poem (Isaias 50)

*4. My Lord Yahweh has given me a tongue of the initiated  
so as to be able to give a word of encouragement to the downhearted  
Every morning He sharpens my ear so that I can listen like the initiated<sup>9</sup>.*

*5. My Lord Yahweh has opened my ear: I offered no resistance nor did I draw back.  
6. I offered my shoulder to those who struck me,  
the cheek to those who tore at my beard;  
I did not cover my face in front of insults and spittings.*

*7. My Lord Yahweh helps me, and on this account I do not feel the insults.  
For this reason I hardened my face like flint  
Knowing that I would not be let down.*

*8. I have near me my defender. Who will sue me?  
Does anybody have anything against me? Let him come near, let us appear together.*

*9. The Lord helps me. Who will condemn me?  
All will get worn away like a garment and moths will nibble at them<sup>10</sup>.*

#### 2. Structure of the poem

What strikes the attention is that in this canticle it is no longer the Lord Who speaks. Who alone speaks is the Servant. As though something was occurring of what St. Ignatius described as “the divinity hiding itself”. But the word of the Servant has a background reference. It is easy to distinguish this reference by means of the expression “my Lord Yahweh” which is new, and which clearly marks three stanzas in the poem (vs. 4, 5 and 7).

This action of the Lord is double and divides the poem into two unequal parts: the first (v. 4) coincides with the first stanza, and affects *the mission* of the Servant who is rendered capable of maintaining himself amidst what appears –by comparison with other poems that have gone before– a change of objectives, and today perhaps we would call “a change of strategy”. The second part covers the whole of the rest of the poem and refers to *the person* itself of the servant. Both are united by a common denominator: the “stubbornness” (or fidelity) of the Servant. This shows that this Canticle carries on with the situation of crisis alluded to in the earlier canticle, which now appears converted into chronic.

Finally, although the topics are the same as those of the earlier poems (in substance: the *mission-vocation* of the Servant, and *his person*), they are treated in this canticle with a *radical change of language* which is what brings us closer to the teaching of the poem. We

can do away with the technical question as to whether that change is due to the author of the third Canticle being different from the other two. What does seem probable is that this new language arises *in fact* from the deception of the Jews once they were repatriated to Jerusalem, after such a long and anxious wait.

### 3. Contents

1) Indeed: in contrast to what, in earlier canticles, was “to implant the law and to free captives”, we find now the “word of encouragement” to the depressed. In contrast to what before appeared as the promise in which “the islands hope”, appears now an “experienced listening”. As opposed to “the sharpened tongue and the sword” we have “the tongue of the initiated and the open ear”. The Servant is now more experienced, more mature. And in this situation in which –said in our language– the “structural change” does not appear possible because what dominates are aggressions and insults, the servant knows that listening to and encouragement to the downhearted are still possible and maintains upright “that great utopia of brotherhood”, that J.A. Labordeta sings about.

2) This step to objectives apparently more modest is what has allowed me to qualify as the “post-modernity” of the Servant of Yahweh, which appeared so utopical and so “modern” in the first Canticle. But unlike our post-modernity<sup>11</sup>, the Servant does not appear disposed to renouncing his mission: he is not going “to turn back” but instead he is going “to harden his face” (vs 5 and 7). And the strength of this incomprehensible obstinacy comes from the same reasons by which the Servant has overcome his collapse in the previous Canticle: confidence in the proximity and help of the Lord, which enables him to withstand a humanly desolate situation. If another graphic and current image of this change of objectives is needed, let us think of the admirable tenacity of the Argentinean mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, when they could not recover their disappeared children. And then thinking of them, seeing them going round in silence week after week and year after year, let us apply to them a verse of this canticle: dictators, people like Pinochet, neoliberals... “will get worn away like a garment and moths will nibble at them”.

3) For all that, more than with our modernity/post-modernity, the parallelism should be made between those canticles and the historical trajectory of Jesus of Nazareth. The initial impulse –and success– of Jesus was followed by a period “of clouds” provoked by the non-conversion of the people, the hostility of religious powers and the incomprehension of the disciples. Before these signs, the gospels testify that Jesus retired to pray and ended up changing His strategy: less preaching to the masses, less cures that were misunderstood, some trips “abroad” to hide Himself away, more dedication to the training of disciples, language in parables... But all these changes, in no way drew Jesus away from His dedication to the Kingdom of God, which He carried on serving obstinately and with a hardened face up to the moment He decides to “go up to Jerusalem” in search of a clarification of things, which would lead Him to the end that we will see in the following canticle. Amidst these changes, the trajectory of Jesus will have been –like that of the Servant– a trajectory of fidelity.

## 4. FOURTH CANTICLE: REDEMPTION BY DEDICATION

### 1. Text of the poem (Isaias 53)

N.B. It's as well to advise that the *mere reading* of this Canticle is something like listening to great music in an old scratched LP record. If you want to hear it in "high fidelity, you will have to read it after having spent some time as a collaborator in some place, be it in Lagos, or in a rehabilitation centre for those mutilated by personal mines (e.g. in Cambodia), or in a prison or with prostitutes infected with AIDS by unscrupulous customers... Evoking some experience of this type, the Canticle will sound something quite different.

As an important novelty, this poem is introduced by a type of prologue, that occupies the last three verses of the previous chapter and which is similar to a musical overture that enunciates the topics of an opera. This character of "overture" is marked also because it is only here and in the last colophon that God speaks.

*Look, my Servant will be successful. He will rise and grow much.  
Many have got frightened of him  
because he was so disfigured that he looked neither human nor man,  
Like this he will amaze many nations and kings will shut their mouth in front of him:  
because they will see something unspeakable and will contemplate something unheard of.*

Three very clear topics. Growth and success of the Servant. But –before– fear and horror. And as a result, amazement before something unheard of. Let us see now the rest of the poem.

1. *Who will believe our announcement and to whom will the arm of the Lord be revealed?*
2. *He grew in His presence like a sprout, and as a root in arid ground, shapeless, without beauty and without an attractive appearance.*
3. *Despised and avoided by men, like a man of sorrows accustomed to suffering, despised and rejected, and before whom faces are turned away<sup>12</sup>.*
4. *But he bore our sufferings and loaded himself with our pains:  
We believed him to be punished, wounded and humiliated by God.*
5. *But he was transfixed with our rebellions and triturated by our crimes.  
What he was having on his back was the punishment of our peace. His scars have healed us.*
6. *We were all wandering about like sheep, each one following his own way; and the Lord made all our crimes fall on his shoulders.*
7. *Maltreated, he was humiliated and did not open his mouth. He kept his mouth shut and was silent  
like a sheep before the shearer, and like a lamb led to the slaughterhouse.*
8. *He was removed from the way without any defence or justice,  
and who has meditated on his destiny?  
They have pulled him out from the earth of the living, wounded by the sins of my people<sup>13</sup>.*
9. *Although he had not committed crimes, nor was there deceit in his mouth, they buried him with the wicked, and his tomb was with the evil-doers<sup>14</sup>.*
10. *The Lord wished to grind him with suffering  
but on dedicating his life in expiation, he will have lineage, he will prolong his life, and the*

*will of the Lord will prosper by his hand.*

*11. The just will be satiated with knowledge, and will see the light by the works of his soul.*

\*\* \*\*

*My Servant will justify many because he has loaded himself with their crimes.*

*12. I will give him as share a multitude, and as booty a crowd.*

*Because he exposed his life to death and was counted among sinners.*

*Because he loaded himself with the sin of many and interceded for sinners.*

## **2. Analysis**

1) This Canticle begins with the same solemnity (and almost the same particle) as the first: “behold”... But this time it is not known who speaks. It is neither God nor the Servant. Putting aside the attempts of historical identification<sup>15</sup>, we have here a type of *chorus like that of the Greek tragedies*, that comment on the events. The allusion to the tragedy seems to me useful to mark the importance of this commentator.

2) We must add here some observations of a linguistic nature, besides those that have already been made in the notes. In vs. 6-7, reference to the Lamb and to sins seems to be contained in the gospel of John (1, 29) and has passed to our Eucharistic liturgy. It is good to know that the Hebrew verb used here (“*paga*”) does not really mean “take away” sins, but “have fallen on him”. Therefore, the Lamb of God “takes away” the sin of the world in as much as “loaded with it”: not in an extrinsic way. In the same sense the word “expiation” of v. 10, translates a Hebrew word which does not have an exact correspondence in English and which means at one and the same time the crime and payment of the crime (along the lines of the Spanish refrain: “en el pecado llevan la penitencia”). The Servant dedicates his life not in extrinsic expiation, but because “he has loaded himself with the sin” of the world. The expression “many” in verses 11 and 12, is the same we find in the story of the Eucharist and in accordance with the semantic structure of the Hebrew (which is much more affirmative than comparative), can be translated as “all”. Finally, in v. 12 the expression “exposed his life to death” is translated more literally as “he stripped himself” (or emptied himself) of life as appears in the hymn of Phil. 2, 8 where he affirms Jesus assumed the image of the Servant, and annihilated Himself (or emptied Himself) of His own self (the Greek verb *kenōō*, has given birth to the word *kénosis*).

3) There is another factor of vocabulary that deserves being commented upon. The expressions of v. 10 sound very hard to a western mentality, although they are more digestible for a Hebrew mentality, less rational and more absorbed in the total mastery of God. Well, the Greek translation of the Old Testament translates as follows verse 10: “the Lord wished to purify him of his misfortunes. If you give an offering for sin, your life will have a long posterity...etc”. This is not the only difference between the Hebrew text of the Bible and that of the LXX. But it deserves to be evoked at least once because this example shows how the Bible “re-reads” itself and this fact of re-reading forms part too of its sacred character as “Scripture”.

4) Although at a first reading, a “collective” interpretation of the Servant would seem less probable here, granted that he appears contrasted with the sins “of the people”, it has been precisely in this Canticle where the global application has worked most, to a whole people – concretely, to Israel in exile. For that it suffices that this oppressing “sinful people” globalise

themselves and transcend the frontiers of a concrete community, as could be Babylon of the past. In the last chapter we will take up this point again.

### 3. Content of the poem

To expose the contents of this Cantic, it could be useful to divide it into two parts that begin in vs. 1 and 10 (the two in which the expression “The Lord” appears). The first part of the “dark night”, in which something “incredible” is announced; but this something incredible is not *the destroyed image* of the Servant (vs. 2 and 3) but the *interpretation of that destruction* (from v. 4). And the second part in which pain keeps getting more important until it culminates in the final triumph, the second factor of the incredibility of this commentary of the chorus. The announced topics are developed like this in what we call the “musical overtures” of this Cantic.

#### 3.1. First element of an incredible announcement

The description of the Servant and of the reaction to his sad state (vs. 3 and 4) clearly evokes the situation of Job and the judgement of his friends (Job seems to be described as a leper in Job 2,7). But now an important step forward is going to be taken: this maltreated personage not only *does not suffer punishment for his own sins*, but *is being loaded with the sin* of those who judge him. A very typical schema of the Old Testament and of religious sentiment is broken here since whenever a calamity occurred, the Psalmist or the people acknowledged their own sin or asked forgiveness to free themselves from the catastrophe that had come upon them. Now it was not the Servant that had to ask for pardon but those *who contemplated him* and perhaps look the other way. This is the first announcement that leads the prophet to ask himself: Who is going to believe us? The description of this alien sin that has fallen on the Servant of God does not seem capable of winning sufficient audience. It is the sin of all his people and consists in *each one following his own path* (v. 6): in that individualism that separates and which instead of living together, prefers to compete. It is difficult to deny that this is a very current sin and that perhaps “falls back” on (or is paid by) some innocent people. So incredible is this unmasking, that the Cantic goes on repeating it in an unhurried, almost monotonous way, underlining more each time the innocence of the Servant (v. 79, to finish with an overwhelming question, before which it is worth while making a pause: *Who has meditated on his destiny?* Today, practically no one for sure.

#### 3.2 Second element of an incredible announcement

But, from v. 10, begins another announcement that is even more incredible, put forward in a magnificent “crescendo” and which lasts till v. 11b: the suffering of the Servant begins to be clarified: despite the sin of mankind *God has not lost control of history*<sup>16</sup>. And because God has not lost control of history, a prolongation of the life of the Servant is announced (which in vs. 8-9 appeared suppressed!), a life full of light and satiety and, it is announced that the project of the Servant (= the will of the Lord) will prosper by his hand. And something even more incredible is announced: *his tormentors themselves will be saved thanks to him*. It is hard to believe this announcement. Because –and again in contrast with the “happy ending” of the book of Job– the irruption of the ending that is here announced does not make the past to be forgotten and this is resumed in the last verses of the poem. Applying a theological axiom we could conclude thus. “The Resurrected Person is *“the Man who was crucified”*”.



## 5. FROM SERVANT OF GOD TO JESUS OF NAZARETH

Historical criticism has been unable to identify with accuracy the Servant of Yahweh. The discussion is between a collective identification (the exiled people of Israel), present in postchristian Judaism and perhaps also in the book of Daniel, or personal identifications: the Persian king Ciro, author of the edict of repatriation<sup>17</sup>, or the Prophet Jeremiah, or the author himself of the Canticles, or the captive Jewish king Yohakim (cf. 2 Paral, 36 9-11), or one of his descendants, like Sesbasar or Zorobabel<sup>18</sup> who, according to the book of Esdras, accompanied the Israelites in their repatriation. Different interpretations have also been put forward for each one of the Canticles.

Personally, I am inclined to think the canticles do not refer to one personage alone, but are a reflection of Deuteroisaias in exile about different figures and situations of the history of his people (Abraham, Egypt, Jeremiah...).

But the fact is that such a historical identification –if ever there was one– is today lost. On inserting the poems in the continuous text of Deuteroisaias the concrete figure whom the author alluded to was lost, and there occurred what so often happens in the Old Testament: *an event of the past is converted into a prophecy of the future*<sup>19</sup>. After its merger with the text of Deuteroisaias, it is now not history but the theology of the Canticles that interests us.

At first, the figure of the Servant is converted into a kind of enigma, or non-identified object’ and hence, is practically forgotten or disfigured<sup>20</sup>. All this calls greater attention to the sudden blossoming of quotes and allusions to the poems of the Servant, identified as Jesus of Nazareth, in the books of the New Testament. And later in the Fathers of the Church would end up becoming one of the classical arguments of Christianity in its polemic with Judaism.

Putting aside this last point, we will comment a little in this chapter on the identification that the New Testament makes between Jesus and the Servant of Yahweh. Let us recall that the big religious revolution of Jesus –following the prophets of Israel– consisted in proclaiming that *the relation of man with God is developed in human relations and not in religious practices, exercises or obligations*. The latter can be useful if they help man for the former; but God does not require them: “What temple can you give me or what place for me to rest? Everything was made by my hands, everything is mine” wrote another disciple of Isaias (Is. 66, 1.2). For this revolution Jesus was condemned as a blasphemer, and the Father resurrected Him “seating Him on His right”.

Let us recall too (very rapidly) that, in the life of Jesus, the announcement of the Kingdom of God and the ambition to gather together the lost sheep of the house of Israel connect well with the mission of the Servant in the first Canticle. The early hostility of the priests and Sadducees induce similar situations to those evoked in the second Canticle. His cures, words of consolation and the defence of maltreated individuals (like the adulteress, the sinner of Magdala or the widow that only made a contribution of two coins in the temple) evoke that “tongue of the initiated” of the third Canticle. And all that we have said about the fidelity of Jesus in our commentary on this third Canticle, prepares us for the trip to Jerusalem and the unheard of destiny similar to that outlined in the fourth Canticle.

Taking into consideration this context, let us cast a quick glance at the New Testament.

## 1. The life of Jesus in the setting of the Servant

To begin with, the public life of Jesus is marked by allusions to the Servant, in three fundamental moments: its beginning, the Last Supper and the Passion.

a) In the scene of the *baptism* of Jesus, the voice of the cloud pronounces a quotation of the first Cantic, in which the word Servant is translated into Greek as *pais* which can mean both Servant and Son. The affiliation of Jesus can be read as service. And the fourth Gospel, although it does not narrate the baptism of Jesus, marks His life with an allusion to the Servant, in the words of the Baptist (“the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world”: John 1, 29). This allusion will be clearer if we accept the version proposed by some: “Behold the Servant of God who takes away ... etc”. This version is supported by the ambiguity of the Aramaic word *tal’ya* which signifies both servant and lamb. But we cannot discuss this here.

b) The words of Jesus *during the Last Supper*, especially the words on the chalice allude too to “the life delivered for a multitude”, and which obtains the forgiveness of sins.

c) Finally, in addition to the narrative traits alluding to the Servant (as the silence of Jesus etc), *the Passion* has been considered by the credo of the primitive church as “death for our sins” (1 Cor. 15, 3-4); also Rom. 4, 24-25), where the added note that this has happened “according to the Scriptures” reinforces the allusion to Is. 53. Also when the Resurrected Christ affirms that “it had to be like this” (Luke 24, 26, 27) alluding to the fact that it was written that way, the reference to the canticles of the Servant seems undeniable.

Not only was the life of Jesus set in this way both in its beginning as well as its end but the evangelist Mathew further marks his discourse with a couple of explicit quotations: in Mt. 12, 17ss, a very long quotation of Is. 42, 1-4 (which probably is badly placed and which would have been more suitable at the end of Ch. 11). And in Mt. 8, 17, as a commentary on the miraculous activity of Jesus another explicit quotation of Is. 53, 4: “he took on our weaknesses and bore our illnesses”.

There is no space to comment on these quotations. We will see now that this life framed in the trajectory of the Servant, forms part too of the content of the first Christian preaching both outwards as well as inwards.

## 2. Preaching and the first Christian catechesis

a) To begin with, it catches one’s attention that both St. Paul as well as the fourth evangelist, when they reflect on the Christian message, have remembered and expressly quote the words of the fourth cantic: “Who is going to believe our announcement?” (Cf. Rom. 10, 16; John 12, 38), though each one understands these words according to his theology. On the other hand, it does not strike our attention that in a *missionary* context, Paul (in Acts 26, 18) describes his vocation with expressions that appear taken from the first cantic: open the eyes of the blind so that they are converted from darkness to the light.

But not only the formal aspects of the Christian announcement, but also *its content* are marked by the figure of the Servant. The book of the Acts abound in allusions to the poems of Isaias, and almost all are found in the first *sermons* of Peter, or in the scene of Ch. 8, where

the eunuch of Ethiopia is converted precisely because Ch. 53 of Isaias was clarified to him by Philip.

b) If this happens “in the outward direction”, catechesis and exhortation “in the inward direction” of the community of believers are marked not just by some concrete trait but *by the whole figure* of Jesus as the servant of Yahweh. Exhorting the Philippians to humility, Paul reminds them that Jesus “took upon Himself the figure of the servant” and He “emptied Himself out” of His divine life (cf. Phil. 2, 7). Also there is an exhortation in the first letter of Peter (2, 21-25) that by means of constant allusions to Is. 53, points out to Christians how they should behave in front of social rejection.

### 3. Implicit Quotations

But more important than the explicit references or quotations, are the implicit allusions, because these emphasise up *to what point these canticles were known to the first Christian community*: so much so that it was not necessary to quote them, a quick allusion was more than sufficient. These implicit quotations are what most abound in the New Testament. Faced with the impossibility of evoking all of them, let us recall only Mt. 20, 28; Rom. 4, 23-25; 15, 21; Heb. 9, 28..., pointing out that the text most alluded to is usually the fourth canticle. In many of those allusions we find another important datum, that we cannot analyse here but which has been pointed out by many commentators and Christologies: how that reference to the Servant colours (or re-converts) many of the titles given to Jesus (Messiah, Son of Man, Son of God, New Man etc...) To sum up: the person of Jesus, His whole life, the content of the announcement and of the life of the Christians –all these are marked by and framed within the figure of the Servant. This sudden superabundance is more attention-catching if we recall the practical absence of those canticles in the minds of the Jews in the years before Jesus. And it brings about, besides, the identification of what we might call “spirituality of the Servant” with the following of Jesus.

#### **“INTERMEZZO”:**

#### ***A new canticle of the Servant of Yahweh in 1999?***

*Respected Sirs, members and those responsible for Europe: We have the honour and pleasure of writing this letter to you to speak to you of the objective of our trip and of the suffering that the children and young people of Africa suffer.*

*First of all, we wish to present to you our warm and respectful greetings. We ask you to be our support and help. For us in Africa you are the ones who we look to for aid. We beg of you for the love of your continent, for the affection you bear for our people, for the affinity and love that you have for your children whom you cherish life-long. And for the love and timidity of your Creator, God Almighty, that has conferred on you all the good experiences, wealth and power to build and organise efficiently your continent, to make it the most beautiful and admirable among all.*

*Respected members and those responsible for Europe: it is to your solidarity and goodness that we appeal for help to Africa. Help us, we suffer enormously in Africa, we have problems and lack much in respect of Children’s Rights.*

*Among our many problems, we suffer wars, illnesses, lack of food. In respect of Children's rights, in Africa and especially in Guinea (Conakry), though schools are very many, we have a terrible lack of education and teaching, except in private schools where good education and teaching can be received but for which big sums of money are necessary. Well: our parents are poor and need to feed us. Neither do we have sports centres where we can play football, basketball or tennis.*

*For this reason we, African children and youngsters, request you to create a big efficient organisation for Africa so as to permit us to advance forward.*

*If you see that we are sacrificing ourselves and exposing our lives, it is because there is too much suffering in Africa. However, we want to study, and we ask you to help us study so that we in Africa can become like you.*

*Well, we beg you very, very strongly to excuse us for daring to write this letter to you, great personages whom we owe much respect. Do not forget that it is to you we have to complain about the weakness of our strength in Africa. Yaguine Koita and Fodé Tounkara, aged 14 and 15, found dead in the undercarriage of a plane. (Text in *El País* 5.VIII.99, pg. 20).*

We are not going to analyse this text. Perhaps there is a perception in it – as Paul Freire said– of the oppressed person bearing within him the image of the oppressor as his ideal human being, the only person he has known. Traits of humility of the Servant and of a “dedicated life”, in this case for the liberation of Africa... can be recognised in the text Whatever the case may be, this text made a tremendous impact on European public opinion some months ago, and now has fallen into oblivion. It is forgotten so easily because of what M. Castells calls “the integration of all messages in a common cognitive model”: we receive this text side by side with news about President Aznar in Oropesa, or news about some match of Barça or about this monument to stupidity called “the war of the galaxies”... With such travelling companions it is not uncommon that the impact is ephemeral and that our good reaction generates into something merely sentimental: what Jesus described as good seed falling on soil over rock that does not allow the seed to grow (Mt.13,5). The following day, that news does not appear in any newspaper and is as though Africans have ceased to “suffer enormously”.

But, even without analysing the text, it is inevitable that it should evoke in us the accusation of the fourth Cantic of Isaias: “they have been loaded with our sins”... For this, it is sufficient to compare the letter of Yaguine and Fodé, with the other data published in the same newspaper in the same month:

*The richer countries make cuts in their aid to the Third World. From 1992, the 21 developed countries have cut by 21% their aid to poor countries (from 63,000 million to 48,000). By contrast, in just 3 years, the financial markets have grown 70%. (In *El País*, 14.VIII.1999). Or again: In the summer of 1999, money spent in Spain on signing up of footballers amounted to 60,000 million pesetas.*

Over here differential facts do not count at all: we are all photocopies of the same human

model. And it is not that we are heartless: in the same summer the girl that a hand dropped through the wall of Ceuta, the Spanish city in Africa, made it possible for her father (who resided illegally in Gijón) to find a job, get a resident's permit and reunite with his daughter. But what the 2 Guinean boys were asking for was not to solve the problem of one girl, or their own problem, but a sort of "Marshall Plan" for Africa that would prevent anecdotes such as that of that poor little creature. And it is when reaching here that all of us prefer to look the other way. One cannot help evoking the complaint of Helder Camara: "If I give food to a poor person, I am called a saint; if I ask why the poor exist, I am called a communist".

It is not sufficient to just get sad about this affair. If I may be permitted to say so provocatively, Herod too grew sad when he was asked for the Baptist's head (Mt. 14, 9). But a system of power that he was not willing to lose tied his hands and prevented him from following the good sentiments that could still rise in him.

Perhaps this could help us to ask ourselves for some way out of this commonplace humanity, this culture of leisure and unimportance which tends to make us all uniform without any apparent exercise of violence and which turns what is most valuable to our humanity into something of a passing summer shower or an ephemeral and unsubstantial one-day flower.

## 6. FOR A SPIRITUALITY OF THE SERVANT

Let us divide this chapter into two parts. In the first we will examine again what was said about the collective interpretation of the Servant, especially in the Fourth Cantic. This recognition of Jesus –the true Servant of Yahweh– in the excluded of the world, will be the basis for a spirituality of service.

### 1. The Crucified People

The expression of this subtitle proceeds from Ignacio Ellacuría. And effectively it has been in Central America where the reading of the poor of the earth as the modern incarnation of the figure of the Servant of God has been more commonly adopted. Servants not because the service of God consists in that misery, but because God assumes their slavery as His own. Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino tried to show besides (following the text of Deuterocanonicals) how –for our shame– our only possibilities of salvation come from those crucified people.

Before them, in a famous little book, Carlos Mesters made a similar reading of the poems, seeking in them a spirituality for the same people who suffer without cause and almost without possibilities of fighting back<sup>21</sup>.

We are not going to consider here that direction. We *ask ourselves* what significance does that acceptance of the people that suffer as the incarnation of the figure (mediated, besides, Christologically) of the Servant have for us? We situate ourselves not in the optics of the people themselves but in the optics of Deuterocanonicals whose work begins precisely with these words: “Console, console my people, says your God” (Is. 40, 1). What does this imperative imply for a follower of Jesus? At least these two things:

#### 1.1. *Broaden the frontiers of the heart*

It appears quite frequently in the Gospels that Jesus maintains a type of relationship with His relatives that could be misinterpreted as reducing affection when in reality it signifies an expansion of the bonds: “My mother and My brothers and sisters are those who fulfil the Will of My Father”.

Well, in this context of the following of Jesus, let us imagine that in a scene similar to that of David and the prophet Nathan, the latter were to pose the following question to us: “Suppose those boys who died in the plane of Brussels, or those who were recently assassinated in Timor, were your own children or your own brothers. Do you think the international community has done enough for them? Most probably your answer would be in the negative. And then Nathan would say to us: ‘*Well, they were so!*’” Something of this is what the broadening of heart, so typical of the call of Jesus, signifies. If we perceive this brotherhood we would feel too the insufficiency of our response.

Another thing is that this cannot easily be our work. We can only allow the Spirit of God to work in us. Last summer a fashion “Miss” at millionaire cocktails and catwalks protested against “the heartlessness of this country that abandons many thousands of animals each

summer”. It never occurred to her to ask herself what heart a country could have that abandons the year round millions of human beings... This is how we are!

### ***1.2. To convert susceptibility***

It is frequent too that the best human relations are threatened by the false wounds of our susceptibility. A conduct, a word (at times even a gesture or a look) are regarded as an attack, a betrayal, a lack of appreciation or a lie. All of us know how much these wounds hurt. We so easily forget that the reading I give to my own acts is not necessarily the reading that the one who receives my acts gives to them. And that the interpretation with which the other receives my actions is not necessarily that which I would have liked to give them when doing them. The impossibility of complete transparency of human relations gives rise to these ambiguities that are so frequently unresolvable. On account of this, the interpretation that we give at times to the things that hurt us is often a mere hypothesis, possible perhaps though not incompatible with other more benevolent hypotheses. *But the evidence of pain substitutes for the lack of data evidence* and unless we are very clear thinkers or have great trust in the other person, we are wont to react feeling ourselves unjustly treated. How many loves and how many friendships and how many very valuable relationships have been wrecked against this reef!

Well, this incurable susceptibility (that surges deep down from our unending desire to feel ourselves cherished and valued), when we allow the Holy Spirit to work in us, is not destroyed by Him nor annulled, but is converted: it is converted by the Spirit drawing it away from our ego and carrying it towards that “servant of Yahweh” who are the condemned of the earth. When so often, so inexorably, it is repeated that a great part of humanity is sustaining with immense suffering the march onward of our world, we have full right to suspect that the world is behaving badly with them. Perhaps unconsciously in the beginnings. But later in guilty fashion when, despite seeing the bad effects of our system of life together, we still refuse to give it up in view of the advantages this system brings us. And we even deceive ourselves by reassuring ourselves that it is also the best for them.

This excuse is something a Christian should reject, recalling the fourth canticle of the Servant. Perhaps we could say that were God not to exist, neoliberalism would be right. I do not know. But we have to add that if God exists, the conclusion is different: “We considered him punished and humiliated by God, when in reality he was triturated for our crimes”. Or as Mesters writes: “The world is organised having as the starting point egoism, and laws are used to maintain this unjust situation” (pg. 69).

To call our attention to this converted susceptibility we usually need prophets. When this happens, small signs are sometimes produced. But one has to know that at other times new Calvaries are brought about. And even those signs are threatened by the inertia of things. Let us quote the example of how the campings in favour of 0.7 caught on so well but how they ended eventually in oblivion, despite the shameful non-compliance on the part of the Spanish Government of the promises made then.

## **2. Servants of the crucified people**

### ***2.1. Mystique of service***

The first characteristic that calls our attention in the canticles of the Servant, is the insistence on mission and vocation. In a version that is not expressly that of a believer, these terms could

be translated by speaking of a “mystique”, understanding by this word something that “comes over”, that occurs to somebody, and has the capacity of putting in motion the complete dedication of that person: like a passion, in the loving sense of the word. I contrast the word mystique to others such as indignation or ethics. A mere ethical commitment to the crucified people would not easily avoid the danger of all morals: that the subject would use morals more to build his own self and his own image rather than to build the Kingdom of God<sup>22</sup>. A commitment that rises only from indignation could easily confuse hunger of justice with thirst for vengeance. The vocation frees one from “the will to power” (that makes man an oppressor because powers necessarily clash): now it is converted into a will *to respond*.

When speaking of mystique (or vocation) we allude to an experience that comes gratuitously. And gratuity –as Simone Weil had seen so well intuitively– is sister to beauty. The will to serve contrasts with the wish to save: nobody can aspire to being the saviour of somebody else, although all of us can help each other mutually. And help implies contact, direct, immediate knowledge. This which has been lacking in many “saving” movements is fundamental: because it is by contact that one comes to discover beauty in the midst of much desolation: as a star is discovered at night, or as one discovers the overwhelming beauty of the desert, or the beauty of fire (which at first frightens). It is then that one passes from fear to love, a love that has a stronger guarantee of lasting out.

This is what gives service of the crucified people a radicalism that society does not understand. The immense majority of our society (including those who desire to be good and profess solidarity) choose to live as if the world was moving along the right road and going well, recognising for sure some drawbacks like isolated things that should be improved. The servant of Yahweh appears to believe that the world is going worse, humanly speaking, even though innumerable partial virtues (especially a great anonymous solidarity) must be acknowledged. This previous choice usually divides opinions: he who has a stance of global discredit is discredited by the society that is not allowed by him to feel comfortable. But the servant of the crucified people cannot accept an economic system whose *primary* will is not to eradicate misery. He will not yield to a society that “prefers to wait” shielding itself with the false argument that “if we keep on progressing” misery will disappear by itself.

## ***2.2. A difficult dialectic***

Calling our attention in the first three canticles of the Servant is a difficult dialectic between stubbornness and ease, between fidelity and gratuity, or between radicality and possibilism. The style of not extinguishing the flickering flame nor breaking the cracked reed, not allowing them, however, to be as they are; on the contrary, reviving and rebuilding them until “justice is implanted in the world”. The mouth like a sword and a face hard as flint but –only?– “to listen and say a word of comfort”. The sensation of futility and of spending efforts in thin air for nothing, with the decision however of never vacillating nor breaking under...

This dialectic is absolutely fundamental, and it is not easy to choose the moments and the doses of each ingredient. Perhaps one can speak of a radicality of objectives and a possibilism of means and styles, but this should not signify relegating the aims to the heaven of “entelequias”; rather they should be constantly brought down to earth as an “eschatological objection” that is converted into an “eschatological incentive”. What appears quite clear is that all one-track styles in this point usually end up being harmful, as our past history has shown a thousand times. And it is worthwhile to recall that the gospels apply *expressly* to the mission of Jesus the sentence of “not extinguishing the flickering flame” that the ecclesiastical



hierarchy seems to ignore, in their obsession to eradicate supposed evils or heterodoxies.

Probably, *only true love has that strange dialectic capacity*. We have said before that it is not a question of being a saviour of the people but of being a servant. The servant has to be persevering and has to calculate a lot, but he is not a “saviour” but a “beggar” of justice. There where Nietzsche expressed the opinion that “autonomy and morality mutually exclude each other”<sup>23</sup> (dynamiting thereby in advance all attempts to develop a true social lay morality), the Christian believes that autonomy is enjoyed precisely for service, since *human freedom* is nothing more than freedom to love.

### ***2.3. Spirituality and history***

The “eyes of the blind”, the “prison of captives”, the return of the tribes of Israel or the “light of nations” are expressions that evidently allude to human history. And constitute the mission of the Servant. Not a mere appendix or a derivative of another more sublime mission.

The Christian God is a God of history. And it is curious that while in systematic theology the theophanic character of history is accepted as a specifically Jewish-Christian trait, this has not been translated, however, into an elaboration of the relations between history and spirituality. The latter appears relegated to the a-historic, characterised by intimacy, in a word “spiritualistic”. And history is seen as a mere lie which one must escape from, or as an autonomous entity, not only in its functioning but also in its relation with all that refers to God. Parodying Luther, this gives rise to a type of “spirituality of the two kingdoms”.

In the face of this, a spirituality of history does not necessarily need to be a millenarist spirituality, a spirituality of close and easy triumph. It is sufficient that it be a spirituality of “open eyes”. And –of course– open not only to our external reality, but open to the heart and its deceits which so often make us falsify, modify or reconstruct the data we receive, making us settle down in a sort of “virtual reality”. Some years ago, in a famous article on spirituality, Jon Sobrino spoke of “honesty with reality”, as the starting point of all true spirituality<sup>24</sup>. It is this absolute honesty with reality that will take us to the last point we wish to develop:

### ***2.4. Assume failure***

Not only its possibility but also the probability of it occurring, although one should try to do things in the best possible way.

When the two disciples who only aspired “to sit one on His left and the other on His right were ironically asked by Jesus if they were capable of “drinking from the chalice He had to drink from”, they unconsciously gave their assent (Mark 10, 37-39): they seemed to believe that it was only a question of a “price” they had to pay to win those positions of honour (maybe they thought of drinking from the chalice of triumph of the powerful). Naturally, Jesus did not ask them to assume His own destiny (that He considered very much His own), but He did want them to view history from the position and optics of the defeated, and assume the consequences of this stance. And the main consequence is to abide by these other words which so often are so carefully forgotten:

“Men today can make a more just world, but they really *do not want to do so*.  
Their new command over the world and themselves frequently serve in reality

more for the exploitation of individuals and groups and nations rather than for an equitable distribution of the resources of the planet, unleashing more ruptures and divisions than communion and communication; more oppression and domination than respect of the rights of individuals and groups in true brotherhood. Inequalities and injustices should no longer be perceived as a result of a certain fatality (let us add: nor as the exclusive fault of the victims); they should be acknowledged rather as *the work of man and his egoism* (XXXII General Congregation of the Society of Jesus, decree 4, n° 27).

A confirmation of these words can be found in the data that we gave in the previous chapter, taken from the same newspaper and in the same month. Naturally these words are totally contrary to that “Leninism of the market” that, unable to believe in a class that achieves history, nor in a supposed “vanguard” that possesses the true conscience of that class, projects all its longings on a mechanism, blind though infallible and invisible and worthy of total obedience, in order to carry on hoping that everything will be brought about mechanically, without having to go through the difficult figure of the Isaias-announced Servant of Yahweh. What can be expected here does not require much comment and was formulated –some years ago– by a North American politician when referring to the liberationist movements of Latin America: It is necessary not only “to destroy but also to discredit them”. Not even to have the patience to wait for these movements to be discredited possibly by their own account, as has occurred on more than one occasion.

In these conditions, to take failure into account does not constitute a desire to embitter life. For me –in harmony with the canticles of the Servant– the possibility of hope not dying in spite of everything depends on the choice of whether history is immersed in Transcendence or the assumption that there is absolutely no Transcendence over history (or within it).

\* \* \*

It is convenient to end by recalling that spirituality is not everything. It can be compared to fuel: fuel is indispensable and it is necessary that it be of the best quality. But by itself it does not decide the construction of the vehicle nor the roads to follow.

## NOTES

1. The second part of the book of Isaias (Ch. 40-55) is called Deuteroisaias (or Second Isaias). It does not appear to be written by Isaias himself (as it was composed during the period of exile) but by one of the disciples of his school.
2. Literally “I have called you in justice”. The Hebraic proposition “b:” has often a dynamic sense that permits the translation: “I have called you for justice”. More probable perhaps is the translation: “according to justice”: indicating that the justice of God that calls consists in choosing an ordinary man of the people instead of the powerful king Nabuchodonosor.
3. I put it in capital letters because the name for the Hebrews was much more than a conventional sound: it alludes to the essence or the truth of being. As if to say: “Here is the true God”.
4. Whether or not these verses 8-9 form part of the poem is debatable. I keep them because they help the “concentric” structure of the poem.
5. Israel is an addition here, which could have come from the later discussions on the identity of the Servant. The Biblical texts on the vocation of prophets (Isaias, Jeremiah, Ezequiel, Amos), are all personal.
6. It is discussed too if this verse belongs to the poem or if it is in its place. I prefer to leave it in doubt.
7. Or “redeemer”. The Hebrew word “goel” alludes to that member of the family whose mission was to ransom relatives if any one of them was made a slave. I choose the translation of responsible because it seems to me that the text wishes to underline this almost “family” bond of the Lord with His people, at the moment of crisis of the Servant.
8. Cf. Jer. 15, 10-18; Jer. 20, 7-9 and 15-18; Jonas 4,2; and Elias in 1 Re 19.
9. The Hebrew text of this verse is difficult to reconstruct. I follow the version of L. Alonso Schökel.
10. It is also discussed if vs. 10-11 belong to the poem. One can put them aside without resolving the question since they do not offer anything new. Besides there is missing in them the expression “My Lord Yahweh” that introduces the other stanzas of this Canticle.
11. Remember that in the first Canticle, we also found traits that distinguished it from our promising modernity.
12. This description appears to allude to what used to happen to lepers in the ancient world. In its Latin version, St. Jerome translated in the following verse “quasi leprosum”.
13. In a text of Qumran there appears here the reading “his people” instead of my people

(‘ammô instead of ‘ammî), that perhaps turns out clearer.

14. *Asair*. This word properly means the rich or those who have enriched themselves. On account of the parallelism with “the evil ones” it is seen that its choice here is profoundly intentional.

15. The Jews, or the faithful “remaining people”, or the prophet himself in the majestic plural form, or the pagans...

16. This is the meaning of the expression “the Lord wished to grind him...” that the ancient mentality did not know how to formulate in another way.

17. And whom Deuteroisaias calls “the anointed of the Lord” (45,1).

18. According to the contemporary prophet Ageo, the Lord calls Zorobabel “my servant” (3,24)

19. For example: the prophet like Moses (Deut. 18,15), the successor of David, or the child whose birth is announced in Is. 7,14.

20. An example of this distortion is the Aramaic version of Is. 53 known as Targum of Jonathas. It begins like this: “Here you have my Servant, the Messiah who will triumph”. Later, where the Hebrew text reads “without figure, without beauty and without an attractive aspect” the Aramaic translation says: “his aspect is not a common aspect and his appearance will be one of sanctity”. In v. 4 (“we considered him punished, wounded by God and humiliated”) the Targum translates: “they took us for scourged people, wounded by God and afflicted”. And translates v. 7 (“like a lamb led to the slaughter house”) as: “he will lead to death the most robust of the nations”...etc. The Servant is converted –according to P. Grelot– into “a sublime, splendid, aggressive personality, a champion who takes up arms and exercises a destructive power over the enemies of the people”.

21. Cf. *The mission of the people who suffer*, 1983.

22. What already took place with religion, will the same happen to ethics?: on losing sociological support it becomes (and needs to be very much more) a spiritual experience. Today, as a result of the rabid individualism of our culture, there is no social support for any ethics, although there could be support for certain particular actions of ethical content but converted now into cultural traits (e.g. a “decorative” solidarity), just as there are religious acts converted into social ornaments devoid of religious impulse.

23. *The genealogy of morals*, Dissert. 2, nº 2.

24. Cf. *Liberation with Spirit*, pg. 23ss.