



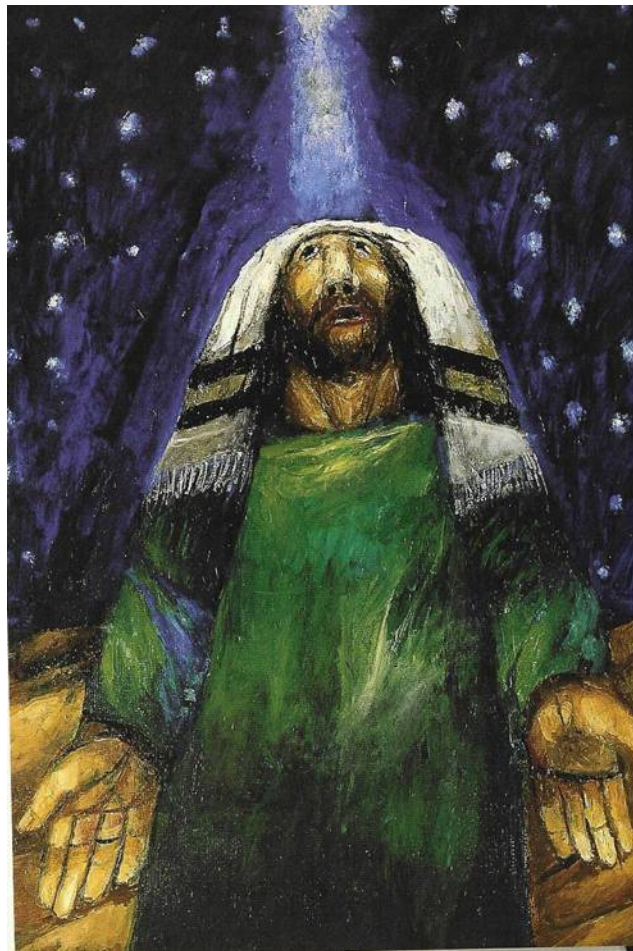
# S.M. 3 OFFICES

MARIANISTI – AMMINISTRAZIONE GENERALE – Via Latina, 22 – 00179 Roma – Italia

# 152

Rome, October 2, 2019

## **Taking Him Outside (Gn 15,5) An Authentic and Prophetic Religious Life (XXXV GC, #36)**



**Summary**

Introduction: "Taking Him Outside"

1. A culture of self-referentiality
2. De-centered or other-referential beings
3. Reviewing our life
4. The cry of the victims of this world is: "Find me beforehand!"

Conclusion

Our most recent General Chapter ("A Man Who Does Not Die; In Mission With the Marianist Family") reminds us of the importance of fidelity to our religious life, to "be the religious we are called to be in the Marianist Family" (which is the title of Chapter Two). It is in this context that the General Chapter calls us to "form ourselves in an authentic and prophetic religious life." Number 36 begins that section with these words:

"Self-referentiality and individualism, in which our vocation is centered in our own desires and not in our self-surrender to the Lord, threaten authentic religious life within community. We must live our vocation with depth and coherence. Strong initial formation provides this foundation and serious ongoing formation supports perseverance."

For this reason the recommendations that follow this number asks the Assistant General for Religious Life "propose articles and other related documents for reflection in Units and communities on the concept of self-referentiality, how it impacts the authenticity of religious life and ways to guard against it." (XXXV GC, #39).

The initial proposition submitted to the assembly asked for a reflection on this theme... but in the end the Chapter agreed on the idea of proposing "articles and other documents." Since I wished to remain faithful to the spirit of the original proposition, it seemed very important to me that I begin with this reflection. To live an authentic religious life is one of the greatest challenges that we always have. In addition, the culture in which we currently live presents us with many challenges to the contrary.

The reflection that I presently offer to you includes both of the following ideas: First, a reflection on self-referentiality and how that affects us; second, some suggestions concerning books and articles that could help us in our reflection on this concern.

I have used sources (books, articles) in our three languages, but not all of the sources exist in all three languages. Thus, not all of you can use everything that is suggested, unless you are fluent in the three languages. For that reason, it seemed better to offer a more developed reflection, than a simple proposal of texts to read.

In sharing this reflection, I hope to start an open dialogue. I would be very grateful to receive suggestions of other books and articles that deal with this topic. Such books and articles could

reinforce what I write here, or even contradict it. We should always be looking for a dialogue that would help us to be more faithful to our vocation.

(NOTE: Sections 1 and 2 are a foundation of philosophical, sociological and biblical content, while sections 3 and 4 are reflections on our Marianist life and mission. They can be read and used independently.)

### **Introduction: "Taking Him Outside"**

*After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." But Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what wilt thou give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "Behold, thou hast given me no offspring; and a slave born in my house will be my heir." And behold, the word of the LORD came to him, "This man shall not be your heir; your own son shall be your heir." And taking him outside he said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be." And he believed the LORD; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness. (Gn 15:1-6)*

This is a biblical paradigm. The Word is always our first point of reference.

The story of Abraham begins with the invitation to leave his homeland and his father's house (Gn. 12). It is a normal and vital process in the development of our vocation. Depart, leave behind, move forward... These words are the driving force in the first years of our vocation. We have all left home, family, friends...

However, there is always something in us that resists. There is always something in us that seeks compensation. There is always something that I have to receive in return. Our material reality, our corporality, our need for survival, all permanently resist or oppose this dynamic of giving oneself and leaving.

We are embodied spirit and spiritual flesh. Initially the spiritual dynamic (the ideal) appears to attract us and is capable of grabbing us and moving us. We leave our house and that of our father. However, little by little, the promises may fade and the reality we are living may not be as nice as we expected. Then a voice begins to emerge more strongly, a voice that pulls back and asks for compensation and security.

*"But Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "Behold, you have given me no offspring; and a slave born in my house will be my heir." (Gn 15:2-3)*

*What will you give me? ...You have not given me...*

Reproaches, conscious or unconscious, then arise in our hearts. They cause us to develop internal dynamics that arise from this perception: "I really have to take care of myself, because nobody is going to give me anything." This is a reproach arising from our most resistant egos. I want more, I need more, what I have received is not enough. You had promised, but what I received was not what I expected.

God's answer to Abram is that the promised will be fulfilled. God is faithful and will give what has been promised. What God does in response to the complaint is not to give, but to repeat the promise and then "take him outside".

That is to say, there comes a time when we "go out" (in response to a call, it is assumed) but there is a time when we need to "be taken out." There are times when God does the work and not us, because God knows well that we have really not yet left on our own. There is too much darkness outside and too much need within.

*"And taking him outside, he said to him: look up at the sky and count the stars if you can."*

That is to say, stop looking at yourself and what you do not possess, and believe in what you have been promised. Stop being fixated on what you lack. Raise your eyes and look much further. Look at what God has done, is doing, and imagine what God can do. Look at what God has given, is giving and imagine what God can give.

Stop looking at yourself.

## **1. A culture of self-referentiality**

### **References**

ZYGMUNT BAUMAN, *Liquid Life*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2005.

BYUNG-CHUL HAN, *The Expulsion of the Other: Society, Perception and Communication Today*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2018.

The "problem" of Abram is also ours today, as it has been for all people throughout history. In a sense, it's nothing new. It is an old struggle. It is that struggle with our ego as it demands attention and makes itself the center of attention. It is "original sin." That sin by which one refuses to be a "creature" but rather claims to "be like gods." Only I make sense. Only I am the reference point for what is real. There is nothing new under the sun.

The problem today is not that it happens, but rather that we do not see it as a problem. We are living in a culture which considers that attitude to be good and desirable. This is the culture of self-referentiality.

The term “self referentiality” has undergone a semantic expansion in recent times. This expansion is due in part to Pope Francis. It is a term used in the fields of linguistics, literature and hermeneutics. The term also appears in sociological and psychological contexts. In those two areas, it applies generally to the human being. It is a term that appeared originally to express the changes produced in Western society. Now, in the globalized world in which we currently live, the term can be found throughout the whole world.

I do not pretend to make a complete analysis of the situation. The truth is that more and more frequently we find situations which make show us that we live in a world in which the only valid reference for the human being is oneself, namely, our perceptions and our feelings.

A recent example is that of the Dutch businessman Emile Ratelband. He asked permission from the justice authorities of his country to change his birth date. Why? Because he feels 20 years younger than the date on his birth certificate. He was born in 1949 but he wants the birth certificate to show 1969.<sup>1</sup> No one doubts that he feels that way. It seems that even his doctors have told him that he has a physiologically younger body than his actual age. Pretending to change the date of his birth reveals the fact that the only valid reference is his own perception. There is no objectivity. Subjectivity is the controlling factor. The “real” is what I feel.

Our current Western culture, which is increasingly global, is on a journey of searching for identity and authenticity. On the one hand, this journey is revealing itself to be useless (as Zygmunt Bauman shows). On the other hand, it is showing itself to be dangerous by time and again eliminating that which is different (as the Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han shows in his book “The Expulsion of the Other”).

Bauman, in the first chapter of his book “Liquid Life,” (The Individual under Siege), begins with a reflection on the search for identity in the midst of difference. He says that paradoxically, it leads to a loss of individuality and an identification with the rest of the individuals. “‘Individuality’ is a matter of ‘crowd spirit’ and a demand enforced by a crowd. To be an individual means to be like everyone else in the crowd – indeed identical with everyone else”.<sup>2</sup> Bauman describes this situation as an “inconceivable dilemma.” He then says that we should not understand this dilemma as a matter of logic that worries philosophers. Rather it is an eminently practical matter, which concerns all human beings throughout our lives. Clearly, we are speaking about the issue of identity and meaning. Bauman continues:

“Since to be an individual is commonly translated as ‘to be unlike others’ and since it is ‘I’, my self, who is called and expected to stand out and apart, the task appears to be intrinsically self-referential. We seem to have little choice but to look for a hint as to how to wander deeper and deeper into the ‘inside’ of ourselves, apparently the most private and sheltered niche in an otherwise bazaar-like, crowded and noisy world of experience. I look

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<sup>1</sup> Newspaper El País, November 11, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Bauman, Zygmunt. *Liquid Life*. Wiley. Kindle Edition. Position 338.

for the 'real me' which I suppose to be hidden somewhere in the obscurity of my pristine self, unaffected (unpolluted, unstifled, undeformed) by outside pressures. I unpack the ideal of 'individuality' as authenticity, as 'being true to myself', being the 'real me'."<sup>3</sup>

In this way, we reduce identity to the internal, to sentiments and to emotions...:

"And so we listen especially attentively to the inner stirrings of our emotions and sentiments; this seems to be a sensible way to proceed, since feelings, unlike the detached, impartial and universally shared or at least 'shareable' reason, are mine and only mine, not 'impersonal'."<sup>4</sup>

Bauman continues by demonstrating that this "task of being individuals" is impossible. However, society itself is also responsible for providing the means to accept living with that responsibility. Over time, the idea of "individual" gives way to the idea of "identity." This idea contains in itself the idea of something proper, individual and unique. At the same time, these qualities are largely given by the group (society, community, culture...). That is why Bauman shows that there is an internal contradiction in this "idea of identity." He continues:

"The search for identity is always pulled in opposite directions; it is conducted under cross-fire and proceeds under the pressure of two mutually contravening forces. There is a double-bind in which every claimed and/or pursued identity (identity as a problem and as a task) is entangled, and it can only struggle unsuccessfully to emancipate itself from it. It navigates between the extremes of uncompromising individuality and total belonging. (...) The road to identity is a running battle and an interminable struggle between the desire for freedom and the need for security, haunted by fear of loneliness and a dread of incapacitation."<sup>5</sup>

Subsequent to Bauman, the Korean philosopher, Byung-Chul Han, continues this reflection but advances it further. In this path of "identity search", he maintains, each one of us must do it alone. We have eliminated the "other", the "different":

"The times in which the other existed are gone. The other as mystery, the other as seduction, the other as eros, the other as desire, the other as hell, the other as pain – all of this has disappeared. Today, the negativity of the other gives way to the positivity of the same."<sup>6</sup>

Later in his book, he explains how this fact is the result of a search for supposed authenticity that eliminates the different in order to be oneself:

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. Position 346.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. Position 355.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. Positions 618-619.

<sup>6</sup> Han, Byung-Chul. *The Expulsion of the Other: Society, Perception and Communication Today* (p. 1). Wiley. Kindle Edition.

There is much talk of authenticity today. Like all of neoliberalism's advertisements, it appears in an emancipatory guise. To be authentic means to be free of pre-formed expressive and behavioural patterns dictated from the outside. It prescribes that one must equal only oneself and define oneself only through oneself – indeed, that one must be the author and creator of oneself.<sup>7</sup>

Not surprisingly, Han's analysis points to the causes of this emancipatory process. These causes are precisely the promises of the serpent in Genesis: being like gods, knowing good and evil, and creators of themselves. There is no other reference except myself. Han continues:

The imperative of authenticity engenders a narcissistic compulsion. Narcissism is distinct from healthy self-love, which has nothing pathological about it; it does not rule out love for the Other. The narcissist, however, is blind to the Other. The Other is bent into shape until the ego recognizes itself in them. The narcissistic subject perceives the world only in shadings of itself. This results in a disastrous consequence: the Other disappears. The boundary between the self and the Other becomes blurred. The self diffuses and becomes diffuse. The I drowns in the self. For a stable self only comes about in the face of the Other; but excessive, narcissistic self-reference creates a feeling of emptiness.<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, we find that a culture of self-referentiality is destructive of society, community and the individual.



*The head is mostly  
an echo chamber*

El Roto  
Newspaper El País;  
October 10, 2018

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p.19.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 21.

## 2. De-centered or other-referential beings

The underlying theme is anthropological. How do we understand each other? In other words, what does it mean to be human? The first question would put the reference in ourselves. However, is there a “definition” of person that is universally valid? Is there any way to say objectively: This is what it means to be a person? This would be another topic for reflection. For our purposes, it seems to me that our starting point must be the Word of God. Once again, while attempting to give nothing more than opening reflections, I propose some ideas from a non-believing woman, a psychiatrist and a bible expert. Her name is Marie Balmory. She proposes an analysis of the texts of the creation of man and woman rooted in psychoanalysis.

### References:

MARIE BALMORY, *La divine origine*, Paris, Grasset, 1993. (Quotations are translations from the Spanish)  
ANDRE WENIN, *Pas seulement de pain...*, Editions du Cerf, 1999. Trad. Española, *No solo de pan*, Salamanca, Sígueme, 2009.

In a typical psychoanalytic analysis, Balmory examines the appearance of the different personal pronouns in Genesis. That is, when the characters say “we,” or “you,” or “I.” Since we are talking about identity and self-referentiality, I find it worthwhile to bring up this analysis here.

Balmory finds that the first “I” used by a human being in Genesis appears only after the sin in the garden. When Adam hides and he hears Elohim walking in the afternoon breeze, we read this dialogue:

*“Yahweh God called to the man. ‘Where are you?’ He asked.*

*‘I heard the sound of you in the garden,’ he replied. ‘I was afraid because I was naked. So I hid.’”*

(Gn. 3:9-10)

In Hebrew, the personal pronoun is not necessary since it is implicit in the verbal form. Thus, its appearance here is significant. Adam’s answer in Hebrew is literally: “The voice of you I-have-heard in the garden and I-have-been-afraid, because I naked and I have-hidden.”

So, the first “I” of the human being appears after sin, and to say: “I am naked.” Adam had already spoken before in Genesis, but in the third person. Eve had also spoken, but in the first person plural (we will eat the fruit) and in the third singular (Elohim has said). This is the first time that man says “I”, speaking of himself in the first person. What he says about himself is that he is a naked, hidden I, who is afraid of YOU.

It is interesting to note that it is an I that has just received a YOU. Elohim has said that it is not good for man to be alone. However, this I who has just received a YOU so that he would not be alone, has hidden himself, for fear of YOU. It is interesting to go backwards to see how that subject



has arisen, that is, these two human beings. What does the prohibition have to do with the appearance of the I?

When, in the second creation account, God creates the human being (Ha-Adam), he may eat of all of the trees in the garden except the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Just after this prohibition, he adds "it is not good for man (Ha-Adam) to be alone. I am going to make a helper *against-him*." We know that He presents all the animals. Adam does not find someone like himself in any of these animals. Elohim does not decide to make another Ha-Adam equal to the first one, so that he is not alone. Rather, he makes him sleep in order to get from his side someone who can "be a helper against-him," someone who can be at his side and in front of him.<sup>9</sup> *"In this sense, the help that would allow the human being to escape from isolation and death would be a face-to-face relationship based on the word, and no animal is capable of such a thing."*<sup>10</sup>

"Something" is not close enough to him, or near him, or before him. Animals could fill that hole. "Someone" is needed at his side and facing him. A subject, not an object.

"It is a desire much deeper than the desire for someone to be there and not before him as an object... but at his side. Hence the fact that the woman is taken "from the side" of the human being is important. It is the place where he desires it, his equal before the Other."<sup>11</sup>

There are many interpretations concerning the meaning of the mandate not to eat from the tree. The interpretation is not important for understanding the meaning of the creation of the other. The mandate occurs between the creation of Ha-Adam and the woman. We must consider this fact because all of the events are intertwined.

Unfortunately, the most widespread interpretation is the one that accepts what the snake says as true. According to this interpretation, a God, jealous of his power and knowledge, fears that man will be like Him and get his knowledge. That is not what God says. That is what the snake says that God thinks. We have somehow accepted the fact that Almighty God is the one who sets the rules. We must accept his conditions in order to play on the board of creation. If you do not accept them you are out of the game, you die. He is a God jealous of himself and of his power, who does not accept equals, but who sets the rules of the game. That is what the snake says, and we have accepted his interpretation.

Before such an abusive God, it seems logical that the human being wants to claim his autonomy, independence and Freedom. In today's culture, the minimum that can be expected from a moderately sensible and mature human being.

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<sup>9</sup> Many translations render Gn 2:18 as: "I shall make for him a helper" or "I shall make a help fit for him". The original Hebrew for "fit" is *k<sup>e</sup>negdô*, coming from *neged*, which root means "being in front of" or even "confront". In *hifil* means "Tell", "refer". (Cf. Following note).

<sup>10</sup> Wénin, André, *No solo de pan*, p. 46.

<sup>11</sup> M. BALMARY, *La divine origine*, pp. 84-85.

The problem with this emancipation process is that it has assumed the snake's lie that God does not want us to be like Him is correct. He does what is necessary to insure that we do not get that knowledge, even to the point of killing us.

Yet, this is contradictory to what God has already said in the same book of Genesis, that he creates us in His image and likeness. We are already his image and His likeness. God calls us to be like Him.

The snake's deception goes further. He pretends to make man believe that by taking the object (the fruit), he will be able to reach the divine gifts of knowledge and eternal life. This is a perversion of the human condition at its root. That is precisely what destroys us as persons, believing that objects can give us divine life. That is what dehumanizes us.

It is in this sense that the prohibition must be understood. You can take everything except that one item. You cannot take all. We must respect that fact that there is a space that we must allow so that the other is another, a YOU. The other is not an object that is there for me and for my benefit.

We must always learn from that reality. We do not live for ourselves alone. It is also a fact that we need to nourish ourselves. God knows that and gives us all of the trees in the garden so we can live, all but one. We need to make space, to respect and give an opening to the other.

After the prohibition, God confirms that man is alone and that it is not good that he is alone. The woman appears - bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. For that, we must make room both in the will of man (the prohibition) and in his own flesh (the rib).

The other can only exist if I make room, if I leave room for YOU, and if I conceive of YOU as YOU and not as something. It is interesting to note that when God presents the woman to the man, he is not yet able to address her as YOU. Rather, he still speaks of her in the third person - "This is bone of my bones."

In reality, I only exist facing YOU and with YOU. The self that pretends to exist by itself is committed to death. That is the profound meaning of the prohibition. If you eat everything, if you do not leave room for a YOU, then you die. You die not by divine "punishment," but by the human condition of being the "image and likeness" of God, as beings that need relationship. We need YOU.

This is how we can understand the verse in Genesis 3:22 in which God Himself seems to support the reasoning of the serpent. "Then Yahweh God said, 'Now that the man has become like one of us in knowing good from evil, he must not be allowed to reach out his hand and pick from the tree of life too, and eat and live forever.'" It is not a "material" problem - whether or not man provide himself with life and even live forever (could science come to that point? There are more and more signs that seem to indicate that we are moving in that direction). It is an "existential" problem. It perverts our essence, our authentic being, which is relationship.

In that sense, it helps to see that God Himself does not say “I” in Genesis until he has created man and woman. He uses the I to give the necessary food for men to live (until that time God had spoken impersonally or in the first person plural). God does not say I until he has created someone in his likeness, a YOU to address. That is when the I of God first appears:

“Look, to you I give all the seed-bearing plants everywhere on the surface of the earth and all the trees with seed-bearing fruit; this will be your food.” (Gn. 1:29)

The I of God appears for the first time when the man and woman are already there. It appears in order to give food, to give them what is necessary to live. To “give to the other” is the key here. Somehow, the I does not exist until there is a YOU. If there is no YOU, there is no I possible.

### 3. Reviewing our life

I do not know if it was necessary to “prove” that we are beings that exist only in relationship or to prove that our root is outside of us (how and why God created us). We are other-referential beings. Self-referential dynamics are necessarily dynamics of death. However, from time to time it is appropriate to return to the fundamentals.

Our *Rule of Life* in Article 2 states – “*Our goal is to be transformed into His (Jesus Christ) likeness and to work for the coming of the kingdom.*” Article 1 has already established the fact that “*Its members...strive for the fullness of charity by consecrating themselves to God through the profession of the evangelical counsels and by placing themselves at the service of the Church.*”

Therefore, our “references” are God/Jesus Christ and others, for the Church and the Kingdom. It seems that we sometimes forget that fact. The influence of our culture of self-referentiality is strong.

Pope Francis in EG 8 says:

“Thanks solely to this encounter – or renewed encounter – with God’s love, which blossoms into an enriching friendship, we are liberated from our narrowness and self-absorption. We become fully human when we become more than human, when we let God bring us beyond ourselves in order to attain the fullest truth of our being.”

Later, when the Pope warns of the risks for pastoral leaders (# 76-101) he develops that idea again. He does so when he begins to talk about these temptations, (# 78):

“One can observe in many agents of evangelization, even though they pray, a heightened *individualism*, a *crisis of identity* and a *cooling of fervour*. These are three evils which fuel one another.

Identity crisis, loss of fervor and individualism... inordinate concern for their personal freedom and relaxation...

I think all of this should lead us to spend time examining ourselves. In addition to ourselves, we should examine our communities, our way of living in the mission, our motivations for the mission. We should also examine our criteria in the acceptance and formation of new vocations, or in the processes of acceptance to perpetual profession and the priesthood. With the idea of provoking personal and community reflection, I offer some ideas concerning these issues. I am aware that they are nothing more than an outline of the issues. I hope that these ideas can serve as the beginning of community conversations. These conversations could help us adjust our personal and community lives.

#### **a. Formation and self-referentiality**

From the outset, the two terms do not seem to go together very well. However, the fact is that the young people who are joining the Society of Mary today share in, to a greater or lesser extent, this culture of self-referentiality. Globalization has done its job.

That is why it seems to me that the first task in initial formation is to detect the “seriousness” of the candidates. Is this person coming to give and to serve, or is he coming to see what he can get? Put another way, does this person come to answer a call, or is he “looking for a life” for himself? Is the initiative from God or is it his own? This last question is the most important one to answer. We cannot answer it directly, but through the vital attitudes that we observe in everyday life – in community life and in the attitude toward service. You have to listen to what he says about his prayer life and his spiritual life. We then must contrast what he says with his daily life in community and in the mission.

Only when there is a certain availability, a desire to open up and let others and THE OTHER into one’s life, can the formation begin. The formation will consist essentially in continuing that process of learning to live in relationship, in reference to others and in obedience to God. In that sense, we can understand formation today as “changing references,” or “de-centering” ourselves.

When they have arrived at perpetual profession or perhaps ordination, the fundamental criterion for acceptance to profession or ordination cannot be the will of the candidate. You cannot accept a person to profession or ordination because he “expresses a great desire.” Wanting something a lot is not a sign of a vocation. As St. Ignatius of Loyola teaches, we must discern our desires. Wishing for good is not necessarily a sign that a desire comes from God. It can come from “my spirit.” Here again we are dealing with self-referentiality. Hence, the need for a contrast with something more objective, or with someone more objective such as the community of the formators. This has been and should continue to be the common practice.

The problem is precisely that when we are in a culture of self-referentiality this discernment becomes complicated. We often see in reports that people support the acceptance of a candidate “because he expresses a great desire.” We assume that, in some way, desires must be satisfied (yours today, and mine tomorrow).

## **b. Community Life**

What is true for people in initial formation is no less true for us. Community life is one of the keys to discernment, to checking our growth in the spiritual life. We know well that it is one of the essential components of our vocation. Our common life is not simply a matter of practical organization (we save time, money or are more effective...).

Community life is a gift from God. “We give ourselves to community life in order to bear witness to God’s love, to attain holiness, and to fulfill our apostolic mission.” (RV 34) That is, it has a witness function, a conversion and personal transformation function, and a missionary function.

Highlighting for the moment the second function, we can understand that the community is the great gift of God to get us out of ourselves in order to avoid this self-referential tendency. Without pretending to anything more than start a reflection, I present two models of community that seek to avoid just that.

- The communities where each one is on his own. This community model is one in which the least common is agreed upon. Any movement beyond that is understood as a threat to my life or my mission or to... (You can add other excuses). This type of community is a community of non-aggression, no questioning, in the name of autonomy, maturity and personal responsibility. However, this normally hides behind self-referential lives that seek to minimize the impact of common life on private life.
- The communities that I make in my “image and likeness.” This a community model in which only those who accept a series of concrete ways of life that are common only to a few people. Those who want to live there must accept this way of life. Only they can live there. We make clear to superiors that they should not send anyone to the community who is not willing to live like that. At a first glance, this model is apparently less self-referential than the first model. In fact, the only thing that changes is that the reference is I and a few people like me.

Obviously, there are no ideal communities. It is worth the effort to check and see if our community “takes us out of ourselves,” or if we are very comfortable in a place, where nobody bothers me or questions me.

### c. Prayer and Liturgical Life

When we talk about our life of prayer, we enter a more complicated field of discernment. Most of what happens there is “inner” and, therefore, has a higher risk of being self-referential. At the same time, when God touches us inside, that is much more effective than any psychological or group therapy dynamic. Hence, the importance of spiritual direction. Good spiritual direction helps a person verify that he is being honest in the search for God’s will and does not reinforce personal desires.

Our *Rule of Life* states: “In order to be faithful to our calling as Marianists, and to grow in the life of faith, we devote an hour of each day to personal mediation.” (RV 55) Our most recent General Chapter reminded us of this necessity (XXXV CG, no. 32) adding “daring to give space to God, to listen to God, and provide a counter-cultural witness to the world.” That is the essential – to give space to God and to listen to the Lord, to be faithful to our Marianist vocation. It is a counter-cultural testimony because the culture we live in pushes us in the opposite direction. We must affirm ourselves in our will, in our “identity” (understood as “what I decide I am”). We are very aware of what fidelity to this daily practice costs us. We are aware of how easily we leave meditation for other more urgent or more important things (we tell ourselves and believe what we tell ourselves). Fidelity to personal meditation is the best antidote to self-referentiality. “Thanks solely to this encounter – or renewed encounter – with God’s love, which blossoms into an enriching friendship, we are liberated from our narrowness and self-absorption.” (EG 8)

Speaking of personal prayer and meditation, reference to the Word of God is essential. It is all about listening, letting THE OTHER talk to us. If the “content” of meditation is my desires, my problems, and myself, then there is a great risk that we will not ground our personal prayer in the Word, but simply ponder about our own desires or wounds. For example, meditating on the Word of God from the current liturgical day, or from specific books of the Bible, gives a certain “objectivity” to our prayer. That is, we avoid the risk of remaining only in our problems, by asking the Lord to help us or give us light. The Word gives us the opportunity to listen, taking us out of ourselves, or at least, it gives us that opportunity. We know that when we have a specific problem, everything we see or hear is stained with the color of that problem.

The practice of *Lectio Divina* that the XXXIV General Chapter (2012) recommended goes one step further – it is listening to the Word in community. It is personal meditation, personal listening as well as common listening. I not only pray with what I have understood, but also with what others have understood. It helps objectivity because it can make me see that I am filtering the Word, as it interests me.

The liturgy is a step further in this “objectivity.” I am no longer there as an individual subject but as a collective one. I pray as a member of the Church. I continue to suspect that much of the resistance to the liturgy (boring, says nothing to me, too hard to understand) is a result of self-referential tendencies. It is hard for us to join something much bigger that does not express what I want or feel. The liturgy is not just an expression of the celebrant, nor of the praying community.

It is something bigger; there is a bigger framework, which pushes us to get out of ourselves. To express our personal or small group intentions, there are devotions.

A note to priests about the liturgy – We do not base faithfulness to the liturgy, to its norms, on some kind of magical rite or alchemy that only works if we follow the rules to the letter. It is about removing the subject, the ego, from the center. The “I” must recede in the face of something much bigger that happens there. Instead, we must contemplate, thank and celebrate, not become the central figure. A good example that is often misunderstood is the number of times that people “evaluate” masses on the quality of the homily, as if it were the most important part of the Eucharistic celebration. Another thing is the recommendation that some churches make at certain times when they indicate that “for pastoral reasons” we may do things differently. There the emphasis is on the recipients of the celebration, not on the celebrant. It is not a permit to “express” ourselves better or be noticed more. The less we interfere with the Mystery and let Grace act and be present in the sacraments and reach its recipients, the better we fulfill our mission. We do this without denying in any way that grace always become incarnate.

#### **d. Mission**

“Do whatever he tells you.” It cannot be clearer – whatever He says.

I think that this is one of the areas where self-referential tendencies are most visible. The resistance encountered by superiors when they wish to change brothers from one mission to another is a clear case. The spirit of the current culture is very obvious in this instance. It concerns the person who takes the initiative, who “looks for work” and changes jobs if conditions do not satisfy – always me at the center.

Obviously, we cannot deny at all that we must be competent and professional in our work. Consequently, we are not qualified for everything. We really need to discern whether I am really at the service of my Unit’s mission or the mission of the Society of Mary, or am I looking for my place in the world. We must always be aware of the motivation behind everything we do. We must discern.

In addition, I believe that a certain “disability” is always necessary in our mission. We must be aware that we are not perfectly prepared. We are not fully capable of fulfilling what we have been asked to do. It would be very opportune to meditate again on the Second Letter to the Corinthians. I remind you at this point about one of the clearest passages in this regard – “We hold this treasure in pots of earthenware, so that the immensity of the power is God’s and not our own.” (2Cor 4:7)

Our fundamental mission is to make ourselves available to grace, so that grace can then reach the world. It is to make ourselves similar in everything to the Son. Let us recall again Article 2 from our *Rule of Life*. “Our goal is to be transformed into his likeness and to work for the coming of his

kingdom.” Over time, I have discovered that there are two principles, apparently contradictory – that guide missionary dynamics.

- **You only give what you have.**

It seems obvious, yet it is not always clear. I mean that only to the extent that we “own” ourselves, are we “owners” of our life and can then give ourselves. It is about maturity and about owning one’s life in order to surrender it. That is why good formation is so important. A formation that makes us mature people in the measure of our real possibilities. However, we can never forget that we always carry this treasure in earthenware pots. We cannot ignore necessary self-care and attention to our needs. However, we do all this so that we are able to give ourselves, not hold ourselves back. Pope Francis warns of this temptation:

“Today we are seeing in many pastoral workers, including consecrated men and women, an inordinate concern for their personal freedom and relaxation, which leads them to see their work as a mere appendage to their life, as if it were not part of their very identity. At the same time, the spiritual life comes to be identified with a few religious exercises which can offer a certain comfort but which do not encourage encounter with others, engagement with the world or a passion for evangelization.” (EG 78)

Thus, we have to take care, train and prepare in order to give ourselves. We are never entirely “owners” of ourselves. We are never fully prepared. What can really drive us to give ourselves is not our preparation, but a love so great that it will take us out of ourselves. Only the experience of God’s love can make us masters of ourselves while at the same time allowing us to surrender to the mission. Again, Pope Francis says: “Here (in the encounter with God’s love) we find the source and inspiration of all our efforts at evangelization. For if we have received the love which restores meaning to our lives, how can we fail to share that love with others? (EG 8).

I think it is worth recalling here Jesus’ invitation to trust the Father:

*“That is why I am telling you not to worry about your life and what you are to eat, nor about your body and what you are to wear. Surely life is more than food, and the body more than clothing! Look at the birds in the sky. They do not sow or reap or gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they are? Can any of you, however much you worry, add one single cubit to your span of life? And why worry about clothing? Think of the flowers growing in the fields; they never have to work or spin; yet I assure you that not even Solomon in all his royal robes was clothed like one of these. Now if that is how God clothes the wild flowers growing in the field which are there today and thrown into the furnace tomorrow, will he not much more look after you, you who have so little faith? So do not worry; do not say, “What are we to eat? What are we to drink? What are we to wear?” It is the gentiles who set their hearts on all these things. Your heavenly Father knows you need them all. Set your hearts on his kingdom first, and on God’s saving justice, and all these other things will be given you as well. So do not worry about tomorrow: tomorrow will take care of itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” (Mt 6:25-34)*



- **...you only have what you give**

It is the mystery of the dynamics of love. It is to believe the dynamics of the Kingdom:

*“Unless a wheat grain falls into the earth and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies it yields a rich harvest. Anyone who loves his life loses it; anyone who hates his life in this world will keep it for the eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and my servant will be with me wherever I am.” (Jn 12:24-26)*

In love, you only have what you give. It is the mystery of the Cross. Here there is little to say, but much to pray about, meditate on and worship.

#### **4. The cry of the victims of this world is: “Find me beforehand!”**

##### **References:**

TONINO PALMESE, *I giovani e il futuro: dalla minaccia alla speranza*, Catanzaro, Rubbettino Editore, 2005.

MIGUEL BENASAYAG Y GERARD SCHMIT, *Les passions tristes. Souffrance psychique et crise sociale*, Paris, La Découverte, 2003.

A culture of self-referentiality generates “problems” at more than the anthropological level. These “problems” have their implications for our consecration and religious vocation as well as the way we understand our mission. It also has very important implications for our worldview and the how and where of our mission.

A culture of self-referentiality also generates an essentially unfair system. It is unfair in itself, not simply because of its excesses. In a 2004 article by J. Seabrook in *The Guardian*, he discusses the poverty generated by the neo-liberal system. He states:

*“The urban poor are emblematic of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Neoliberal policies have accelerated the growth of slums while at the same time subsidies for agriculture and nutrition have been withdrawn, health and education have become commercialized products, water has been privatized and sanitation has almost been abandoned.”<sup>12</sup>*

Seabrook says that by 2030 experts estimate that almost 25% of humanity will live in these slums, outside the system. From the comfortable positions of Europe and North America, it is relatively easy to forget this, because we do not see it every day.<sup>13</sup> Bauman, echoing this article, comments

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<sup>12</sup> Seabrook, Jeremy, «Powder keg in the slums», *Guardian*, September 1, 2004.

<sup>13</sup> A recent book on this topic: Lessenich, Stephan, *Living Well at Others' Expense: The Hidden Costs of Western Prosperity*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2019.

that “the heroes of Seabrook’s story are exiled to the far end of the scale along which the places of all humans in our progressively individualized society are plotted.” Later he adds:

“They are the dregs, the waste and the rejects of the global free trade and economic progress that on one (our) end of the spectrum sediments the joys of unheard-of affluence, while dumping unspeakable poverty and humiliation at its other end, and sprinkling fears and gruesome premonitions over all its length.”<sup>14</sup>

Those of us who worked in these slums know that this is not an exaggeration. There is waste and devastation. They live this way. It is true that we cannot solve the “problem.” We are not directly responsible for it. However, we cannot fail to see that our way of living, our culture, is generating this reality. Does this reality have some implications for our personal and community lives? Is there anything I/we can change? Further, thinking about our mission, are we doing what we have to do?

We have a great potential when working in education. How are we educating? Are we preparing more leaders for this system that inevitably generates human waste? I am very aware that systems change from the inside, not the outside, not by getting out of the way and criticizing. Maybe, we should review, in each place and circumstance, what we do and why we do it.

The Italian Salesian Tonino Palmese<sup>15</sup> reflects on the reality of the youth in postmodern Europe. He reflects on the role of education in offering the youth of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the possibility of looking towards a future different from that offered by the current system. Palmese is partly inspired by a study done by two psychiatrists, Miguel Benasayag and Gérard Schmit.<sup>16</sup> He lays out the problem as follows:

“Especially in our first world, there are millions of young people who are often thrown into their existence and look at their future with concern, or worse, they want to ignore it. To many, this view is not so much a promise to build, but a threat to avoid. Given these considerations, I recognize with greater clarity those lines of suffering and anguish that cross transversely through the existence of our young people. These young people come from varied situations. They come from the wealthiest to those immersed in terrible socio-economic areas. They have depressed faces. Faces that have difficulty even in receiving a caress, because often this is a fruit of market logic, or worse, pathological logic. Then, I wonder how this future can be built if today it is no longer possible to receive that caress that allows for hope?”<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Bauman, Zygmunt, *Liquid Life*, Wiley. Kindle Edition. Position 467.

<sup>15</sup> Palmese, Tonino, *I giovani e il futuro: dalla minaccia alla speranza*, Catanzaro, Rubbettino Editore, 2005.

<sup>16</sup> Benasayag, Miguel & Schmit, Gerard, *Les passions tristes. Souffrance psychique et crise sociale*, Paris, La Découverte, 2003.

<sup>17</sup> Palmese, Tonino, p. 17.

Of course, the only possible point of reference allowing us to move forward on this path is Jesus Christ and the Gospel. Palmese proposes the case of Jairus' daughter (Lk 8:49-56). Jairus goes to the Teacher and asks for the healing of his daughter. On the way, his servants tell him that the girl has died. Jesus then says: "Do not be afraid, only have faith and she will be saved." When they arrive at the house and find everyone crying Jesus says; "Stop crying; she is not dead, but asleep." Palmese comments:

"Given this statement, the rest of the community, made up of adults, immediately moves away. (...) It is easier in face of a tragedy to say that there is nothing to do. (...) According to the Messiah, they should not think of the young woman as dead, but simply asleep. The problem must always go back to the relationship. The Nazarene knows well that between Him and the young woman there can be no death relationship."<sup>18</sup>

He then proposes that the first commitment should be to eliminate from our language all expressions and all language that speaks of "salvific impossibility." The meeting he had with a young man from a juvenile detention center, which he had recounted earlier, is a vital example:

"I visited various educational agencies. Among these, there was a juvenile detention center. At the end of the meeting that included speeches, music and images, there was an affectionate and grateful farewell from those "locked up" young people. A young man approached me. He hugged me and whispered these words in my native Neapolitan language: «Tonì, stamm'a senti: se per caso avesseme nascere n'ata vota, pe' favore, ncuntrammece prima. Sarà meglio pe' tutte e dduie. Così, io nun stonghe in carcere e tu me ncuntre int'a nu posto cchiu belle»."<sup>19</sup>

Here is a young man who believes that a different future is possible... because of meeting each other. A different future is possible... for both of us. It can be better for both of us. I will not be in jail and you will find me in a more beautiful place. But the important thing is that we must meet again. That seems to matter more than getting out of jail.

"Find me beforehand." It is the call of the millions of people expelled from the system, of the millions of young people threatened by the future – find me. Come out to meet me. Beforehand. Because it is still possible that what has happened will not happen again. Another future is possible. Nothing is impossible for God.

Believe in an ever-open future... because God saves.

Create relationships that are open to hope... because God saves.

Here is an attitude and a task for our mission, wherever we are and in whatever circumstances we find ourselves. However, we must remove ourselves from the center and hang on to the ONE who saves.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. 19.

<sup>19</sup> "Tonino, listen to me: if we happen to have to be born again, please find me beforehand. It will be better for both of us. Then I wouldn't be in jail, and you'd find me in a nicer place." Ibid. p. 18.

**Conclusion:** *And taking him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and count the stars, if you are able to number them."*

We end by returning to our opening text, to our paradigm. We need to be "taken out." We cannot go out alone. There are the gifts of community, prayer, mission and those in need in this world who shout out "Find me beforehand." All these are gifts, incarnate, everyday grace, by means of which God takes us out.

We need to be "taken out," because the urgency of salvation is great. There are millions of suffering and needy people. God urges us to let ourselves go out. There is a great need for salvation to avoid spending our lives looking at what He has not given me or what I have not received.

It is God who takes us outside and tells us: stop looking at yourself, raise your head, look at the sky, stop complaining about what I have not given you. Look at everything I have given you. Trust me, I will give you more than you can imagine.

Number the stars, if you can.



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