



December

A WOMB COMMUNITY

From the First Letter of St. Peter the Apostle (1, 1-10)

Therefore, lay aside all malice and all fraud and hypocrisy, all jealousy and all slander, like newborn babies who yearn for pure spiritual milk, to grow with it towards salvation: if you have truly tasted how good the Lord is.

Holding onto Him, a living stone, rejected by men, but chosen and precious before God, you also are used as living stones to build a spiritual building, a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices pleasing to God through Jesus Christ. In fact, one reads in Scripture:

Behold, I place in Zion

a cornerstone, chosen, precious

and who believes in it will not be confused.

Honour therefore to you who believe; but for the unbelievers

the stone that the builders have discarded

has become the cornerstone,

stumbling stone and stone of scandal.

They stumble because they don't believe the word; this is what they have been destined for. But you are the chosen race, the royal priesthood, the holy nation, the people that God has purchased because you proclaim the wonderful works of Him who has called you from darkness to His admirable light; you, who once were not a population, now instead are the people of God; you, who were once excluded from mercy, instead have now obtained mercy.

From a letter of Padre Pio to Antonietta Vona (Letters III, p. 846)

After love for our Lord, I recommend to you love of the Church, his Bride and our tender mother. This dear sweet dove which, alone, can lay the eggs and let the little doves be born to the Spouse. Thank God a hundred times a day for being a daughter of the Church. Rest your gaze on the Spouse and Bride, and say to the Bridegroom: "Ah, you are the Bridegroom of a beautiful Bride". And say to the Bride: "You are the Bride of a Bridegroom that is totally divine!". Have great compassion on the Church's pastors and preachers and also on all those who care for souls. See, my daughter, how they are scattered on the face of the earth, there being no place on earth where they are not plentiful,. Pray to God for them that, by saving themselves, they may fruitfully gain the salvation of souls. In this regard, I beseech you never to forget me when you are before Jesus, because he gives me a great desire never to forget your souls.

CATECHESIS

One question: To what extent does the Rosary make us a community?

Father Franco Moscone, our General Director, in the *Pastoral Plan 2019-2020* of the Archdiocese of Manfredonia-Vieste-San Giovanni Rotondo, invites each parish to be "a community like a womb, able to collaborate in educating the community".

We can certainly repropose this invitation to our Prayer Groups, also because Padre Pio, although not having used this expression, had an image that was close to it. He wrote to Antonietta Vona: "*After love for our Lord, I recommend to you love of the Church, His Bride and our tender mother. This dear*



sweet dove which, alone, can lay the eggs and let the little doves be born to the Spouse". (Letters III, p. 846)

In catechesis and ecclesial reflections in recent years, a characteristic image of the first communities has been recovered: they were groups of people reunited by faith in Christ and by the baptism that had generated them. For this reason the maternal aspect of the Church is often underlined when speaking of "womb community".

Custodians of a mystery

In this way we add another piece to our missionary reflection. "Open the doors to Christ" - the expression of John Paul II with which we concluded the previous chapter - urges us to proclaim a kingdom of God which is not fearful, but which helps man to become more of a man. All this however, requires communities who are not only aware of the gift they have received, but who take up responsibility for who they are, overcoming a faith made up of enthusiasts, exteriority or escaping to the past, in order to become aware that the Church does not only generate children through Baptism but must also accompany them with fruitfulness of the word.

If we compare Baptism which we have received to the parable of the Sower, it is easy to note that the fruits of the baptised were not all equal: often the earth upon which the seed is sown becomes rocky and inhospitable. Assuming the responsibility to be "womb communities", means that as Prayer Groups we can commit ourselves in the growth of the seed and the renewal of the soil. It is not enough therefore to generate new children, but it is necessary to feel as a Christian community the commitment to make them grow, but this can only happen if the Word of God is sown and more terrain is suitable to render fruit.

In concrete terms, a Prayer Group that complains about the advancing age of its members and the ever smaller number of people who attend it, in order to become fertile ground once again, must allow itself to be nourished by the Word of God. In this sense, our bishop looks to Mary, model of the generation: "Mary, according to Saint Luke, meditated all these things in her heart". For this reason he turns to the Virgin as follows: "Help us to keep the attitude of listening, a womb in which the word becomes fertile which makes us understand that nothing is impossible for God". We must learn to pray to the Virgin Mary, especially through the Rosary, looking to her as a teacher in listening and understanding the Word of God.

A Word that gives life

Padre Pio delivered the Rosary as a meditative and educational prayer together: the daily representation of the mysteries of Christ in our life, united with Mary's intercessory prayer, is the privileged moment of our day, in which we are called to regenerate ourselves in faith and to read the power of the Holy Spirit in the events of our lives.

John Paul II on various occasions called for this way of reciting the Rosary: not a prayer that repeats unlikely formulas, but a means of meditating and making Sacred Scripture efficacious.

Presenting our petitions to God through Mary's intercession - after reading a biblical passage - means believing in the strength of the Spirit that comes to renew man's life.

Masters of spirituality often insist on the need to move from a purely vocal prayer, made up of words which we can also say with the heart, but which remain expressions detached from our lives, to a meditative prayer, which brings our daily life into prayer and prayer into our daily lives. To understand all this, let us first of all look at how much fruit is present in listening to the Word of God. The Word produces fruit from the same creative will of God which germinates the earth: "Let there be light. And the light was...". It is the same word that fertilises the womb of Sarah, Abraham's wife. In the book of Genesis there is an all human story that puts together the sadness of that father who has a marvellous land, given to him by God but has no children, with that of his wife Sara, who is jealous of the slave and her fertility.



Then the intervention, His word in the form of a promise. There is no immediate answer to prayer, but a different perspective, the invitation to trust God because He can help in the best way. It is the prophecy of all the people of Israel: live the promise, live the expectation. From the journey of the desert to the suffering of exile and then to the coming of Christ, the whole promise helps to mature in faith.

The first step from a vocal prayer to a meditative prayer is to learn to recite the Rosary as a prayer of faith: to see how God enters into our history to enrich it first of all with His presence. To say the Rosary is to meditate in our hearts on the great works that God does, just as Our Lady did.

When faith becomes silence

During these months of suffering which Italy and the rest of the world has experienced, the two world wars during and after, have often been recalled. Although the damage and pain cannot be compared to what has been experienced throughout the world since the beginning of the pandemic, we can still note some similarities, especially for that widespread discomfort in the face of something unthinkable, unknown for its size and duration. In many Italian families, in the time of the lockdown, the rhythm of prayer increased, either because they stayed at home for so long or because they needed a particular strength to face tomorrow.

In this very particular period, our faith was put to the test; those who believed were certain that God would not leave them alone, but in concrete terms the pain for the dead, the suffering of illness and the disruption for work caused fear and dismay. Now, in this renewal full of uncertainties, we look around us: it is necessary to listen, to bring everyone closer, to welcome and console those who have lost heart, those who have seen their lives radically changed, those who feel they have lost everything and no longer have points of reference.

It may be useful for us, then, to reread an analogy with the World War, how Padre Pio accompanied so many families during that period of great trial and uncertainty. One of the most frequent requests that came to him was to have news, of their loved ones who were at war. Padre Pio was not a magician, but sometimes he could give concrete answers, if the Lord allowed it. But in all cases he was the loving father who accompanied in the test of faith.

Lucietta Pennelli, one of his spiritual daughters, also had a brother in the war and her family was very worried, because there had been no news of her brother Giovanni for a long time. In the first years of the war the news had alternated with silences, the words of Padre Pio had accompanied and encouraged the family to hope and each time after waiting, a ticket or a greeting arrived from Radio Atene, which reported news of the prisoners, including – precisely - Giovanni the brother of Lucietta. Since the summer of 1942 there was no news for four years. Hope seemed to fade, trust in Padre Pio's words was there, but it was put to the test every day. After crossing that long desert, with a faith that by now seemed to have run out of the reserve oil of prudent virgins, Giovannino returned, it was the Wednesday after Easter 1946.

Mary and phase three

The ability to live the desert of one's own existence recalls a well-known expression of Luke's Gospel: *Mary meditated all these things in her heart*. The wonders that mark Mary's life are extraordinary flashes of light that show a daily life that is difficult to live and accept: one must not only believe, one must meditate and guard God's action. We are faced with a distinction which is important for each of us: it is not excessively difficult to believe in the existence of God, just as it is useful and encouraging to remember the miracles with which the Lord sometimes adorns the lives of the saints and, specifically, that of Padre Pio. This is a good starting point, but it is only the beginning: faith must be educated, faith is a love that becomes jealous, it is to strip ourselves gradually of our points of view in order to get closer and closer to those of God.



When we speak of a community that educates in the faith we are referring to what we can call the third phase of Mary's life: with the Annunciation She is filled with the mystery of God, with the visit to St Elizabeth She celebrates this mystery of God by acclaiming: Great things the Almighty has done in me. But at the wedding of Cana She becomes aware of being an active and responsible part of God's kingdom, it seems that She anticipates it, that with her Mother's heart cannot but help to reach out to her brothers and sisters who are in difficulty. This is the work for the kingdom of God that makes us a womb community.

Certainly, through baptism and our personal history we are filled with gifts from the Spirit and therefore we too are called to recognise them humbly and to say: great things the Almighty has done in me.

But we cannot stop at this, we must let ourselves be seduced by God's dream, that of reaching the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

Padre Pio teaches us the value of this womb church, which is absolutely not to splash the faith or raise barriers to defend it, but to live the solutions that the Spirit puts on our path. We follow, through some images, the indications that our father Archbishop, Father Franco, gives us to fully understand what it means to be a womb community that educates in the faith.

Missionary men and women

The Rosary can become the prayer that educates people in faith and mission. The recitation of this prayer must pass from simple vocal prayer, made up of important words, which we say with the heart and with devotion, to a long meditation on faith: Mary meditated all these things in her heart. To meditate with faith on the most demanding events of our existence, means to put oneself in Mary's school. To be missionaries means helping each one of the brothers and sisters we meet to discover God's work in their existence, following the example of the Virgin Mary.

Prayer to St. Pio by Monsignor Domenico D'Ambrosio

Lord Jesus, Crucified and Risen,
we thank you for having given us Saint Pio of Pietrelcina,
who represents the image of your pain and passion,
epiphany of the merciful face of the Father.
We ask you, in imitation of the "Holy Brother of the Gargano",
to make our life "an intimate and loving participation in your sacrifice",
a careful and generous disposition in the service of fraternal charity,"
a motive of belief in the message of Truth and Love"
that as your disciples we must announce to the world.
May our praise reach you Almighty God,
our praise for the holiness of Padre Pio,
a sign of great hope for this tormented world of ours.
May Thy Holy Servant Crucified with Thee intercede for us out of love.
Amen