

**March 2023****VI****Spiritual gifts, as a sign of Christ's love through his incarnation****From the Gospel according to John (12, 1-10)**

Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table. Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and being in charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it. Jesus said, "Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial. For the poor will always be around you, but you will not always have me." When the large crowd of the Jews learned that Jesus was there, they came, not only on account of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well, because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus.

We should read the episode mentioned above in the light of what is written in the previous chapter (Jn 11), which is the when Jesus resurrects Lazarus. The evangelist mentions Jesus' pain for the demise of his friend and of the great familiarity he had with his sisters. The supper that is referred to is the celebration for Lazarus new life, and is marked by a gesture of anointing with an oil that fills the whole house with perfume. The care with which this episode is described offers many elements for reflection: first of all that of the dinner, as a place where Jesus is keen to manifest his divinity.

We want to speak about the prodigies and mystical signs linked to the figure of Padre Pio. To do so, we decided not to choose one of the miracles performed by Jesus. Rather we chose to give importance to the scene of a supper, so that the miracle is given more relevance: it is a sign, an extraordinary sign that takes place in ordinary life, to indicate the effective and saving presence of God in man's life. Lazarus' miracle is not to be regarded as a solution to the problems, in fact in that festive atmosphere Jesus did not limit himself to thanking Mary for her gesture of anointing his feet, but also asked that everyone let her keep on doing it. That oil is a sign that his death was approaching: «Let her do it, and may she keep some for the day of my burial."

We could say that Jesus' love towards his disciples (and towards us) is expressed in the sacrifice of his whole being, and this will be the basic meaning and value his passion. In St. John's words, before the last supper: "Having loved his children, he loved them to the end".

A miracle is nothing but a sign of God's endless love for mankind. All miracles are a sign of the victory over evil, not only the physical one, but above all the moral and spiritual one. It is symptomatic that the Evangelist presents two meetings of the Sanhedrin on the occasion of the resurrection of Lazarus. The first one took place after the miracle, and it is then that they decided to kill Jesus; a second meeting took place after this supper, because people went to see Lazarus and they decided that he should be killed, too.

This makes us think of a mafia strategy. It is rather a displeasing method, which discourages us, and makes us think that evil always wins, that we are defeated from the start. But the signs of Jesus go in a completely different direction: they want to tell us that He has conquered death, not only the physical one, but also that of man's sin and wickedness.

**From a letter from Padre Pio to Father Benedetto (Ep. I, pp. 1093-1094)**

What can I say as a reply to your questions regarding my crucifixion? My God! What embarrassment and humiliation I suffer by being obliged to explain what you have done to this wretched creature. On the morning of the 20th of last month, in the choir, after I had celebrated Mass, I yielded to a drowsiness, similar to a gentle sleep. All my internal and external senses and even the very faculties of my soul were immersed in a stillness that I find hard to describe. Absolute silence surrounded and invaded me. I was suddenly filled with a great peace and abandonment, and everything else disappeared, and caused a lull in the turmoil. All this happened in a flash.

While this was taking place I saw a mysterious person before me, similar to the one I had seen on the evening of 5th of August. The only difference was that his hands and feet and chest were dripping with blood. This sight terrified me and I felt like I was about to die, and indeed I would have died if the Lord had not intervened and strengthened my heart, which was about to burst out of my chest. This vision disappeared and I became aware that my own hands, feet and side were dripping with blood, too. You can imagine the agony I experienced and continue to experience almost every day.

Your body is like an altar

The Lord Jesus manifests his greatness by taking a human body and becoming similar to us. The miracle of miracles is that mysterious exchange whereby God becomes like us and we are transformed into children of God. The body is the place of the miracle, sometimes in an extraordinary way, generally in an ordinary way: God manifests himself in our bodies, in our actions, in the crosses and joys we carry.

When we speak of the stigmata of Padre Pio, we should be bear in mind that Padre Pio looked at his body with a certain uneasiness, due to the many illnesses he had and it was not only a place of pain and humiliation, but was slowly becoming the place of a particular and special manifestation of God. In 1911 Father Benedetto accompanied his disciple Padre Pio to Naples for a medical examination. On the way back he left him in Venafrò, where he was to undertake the introductory course in preaching, alongside all the other fellow students. A few weeks after Padre Pio fell ill and, for the first time, the friars realized the diabolical vexations he endured almost every night, as well as the ecstasies he experienced after receiving the Eucharist. Regarding the latter, Padre Pio complained to the Lord that others noticed what was happening: his body was becoming the place where the mystery manifested itself and this made him extremely uncomfortable.

At a certain point during the ecstasy (all of Padre Pio's words have been transcribed) he turned to Jesus and asked him: "What do you mean, I will glorify myself in you?". It sounded like God had big plans for him, and that his martyred body must become the privileged place for this manifestation. However, allop of this suddenly stopped. Having realised he was getting worse, his superiors decided for his return to Pietralcina. Almost incredibly the day after he got there, Padre Pio was healed, and even sang during Mass on the solemnity of the Immaculate Conception. Once again it looked like his body revealed something mysterious, but once again it didn't give certain immediate answers. Even among his brother friars, some would look at his sudden recovery with suspicion.

In his correspondence in the following years, the figure of Job becomes increasingly present, who becomes the key to understanding his suffering: only with deep faith can one approach the mystery of God; that wounded body was a symbol of his isolation from men but not from God, who manifested his glory precisely through Job's faith, not through his suffering: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted" (Mt 5:4).



Padre Pio's stigmata

On the 20th of September, 1918, the Lord brought his project to completion. The time had come for what the Lord had prepared Padre Pio for in the last eight years: his stigmata became visible. In the meantime war had started, and the friars were almost all at the front, some as soldiers, others as chaplains; the horrors of war were terrible, the Pope asked to pray for the end of so much suffering, and Padre Pio offered himself as a victim for this purpose.

One morning he was alone in the convent, together with the boys of the small, quiet seminary; he went to the choir for thanksgiving after the Holy Mass: much of what happened then would remain wrapped in silence. He spoke of a mysterious character, the one who had already wounded his side on the 5th of August, an external wound, which shed copious blood for a few days; according to the teaching of Saint John of the Cross, what happened inside him was manifested externally: the love of God completely possessed his spirit, and attracted him into His being. Once more this character appeared to him and pierced him, and causing another wound on his side and leaving the marks on his hands and feet. Padre Pio dragged himself into his room, tried to hide the stigmata in the hope that the Lord would then hide them again. These external signs were a cause of confusion and indescribable and unbearable humiliation". That same afternoon and the next day some spiritual daughter of Padre Pio's noticed the thing; he asked them to pray that the signs could disappear. One of them, Vittorina Ventrella, told him something which would become his awareness over time: those signs were not for him, but for others.

Day by day, Padre Pio understood the profound link between the signs of Christ's passion and his mission as confessor: to men crossed by selfishness and concentrated exclusively on themselves, God opposed the concrete, visible sign of the crucifixion, which Jesus had accepted for love. People started to witness conversions and works of charity, the rumour of the first miracles spread, the anger of the devil became unleashed, and at the same time the misunderstandings and slander began, which would deeply mark the soul of Padre Pio.

By now, however, Padre Pio had made his choice, thus confirming what his intention had been for the past years. This was well described in the letter to Nina Campanile: «I had rather die than fail your call. But you, Lord, who made this son of yours experience all the effects of a true abandonment, arose in the end and stretched out your mighty hand to me and led me there, to where you had first called me. Oh my God, may infinite praise and thanks be given to you. You hid me from everybody's eyes, but since then you gave me a great mission: a mission which is known to you and me alone. [...] I can hear a voice inside me which keeps saying: Sanctify yourself and others» (Ep. III, p. 1009-1010).

The way was paved, but Padre Pio could not and did not want to carry the cross on his own. A few days after being stigmatized, he wrote to that Vittorina Ventrella who had urged him to recognize the stigmata as a sacrifice for others: «Oh my dear daughter, I feel a great need to stay a while in the company of the various Marys, who know how to have compassion of the dying Lord!» (Ep. III, p. 620). To Erminia Gargani he entrusted a mission, which over the years would become that of his spiritual children: «We shall go on living a great deal longer, so as to drink from the chalice of Gethsemane till it is over, till we have drunk the dregs, and breathe our last on Calvary while being abandoned by everyone and everything. My interior suffering increases constantly without respite. I beg you not to worry either a great deal nor even just a little for this, knowing it is the will of the Lord and that he wants nothing more than being loved by all his creatures. All I ask you is that you stay by the Crucifix with your prayers, as new Marys, and offer up its pain and grief to the justice of God, that he may one day be favourable towards me» (Ep. III, p. 758).

Like the Marys under the Cross

It is easy to understand how difficult it is today to accept and share the power of these words. Indeed, Pope Francis pointed out: «The world does not want to cry: it prefers to ignore painful situations,



cover them up, hide them. A lot of energy is spent to escape from situations in which suffering is present, believing that it is possible to conceal reality, where the cross can never, never be missing". However, the very mission and credibility of Padre Pio's spiritual children are at stake. His spiritual children and Prayer Groups are not requested to make the distance between the life of the believer and that of the non-believer greater. Rather they are meant to help understand the truth of the cross. This is an event that touches everyone's life - as the Pope said- and it cannot be ignored. However it has its deadline. Padre Pio with his story and with his teaching reassuringly said:

«Remember and keep firm in your minds that Calvary is the mountain of saints; but remember that after climbing Calvary, planting the cross and breathing his last on it, one will immediately ascend to another mountain which is called Tabor, the heavenly Jerusalem». On Good Friday the liturgy provides us with the rite of Adoration of the cross: the spirit of this celebration is undoubtedly that of encouraging meditation on the suffering of Christ and fostering compassion; what is revered and adored is no longer the cross as a place of torture: we are now in front of a glorious cross, the instrument through which the world was redeemed. The Pope prompts us to look at the pain of the other, so as to be present in the moments of suffering, but it is necessary that this, our presence is not only compassion, but helps to go beyond, to look at pain as a participation in the sufferings of Christ, as purification and, above all, to Calvary as the penultimate stage of existence, because after that mountain there is always Tabor.

The invisible stigmata

The phenomenon called the "invisible stigmata" is still partially hidden in mystery, although some details were directly reported to us by Padre Pio. When in 1968 someone reminded him that he had had the stigmata for fifty years, he specified: «I have actually had them for fifty-eight!». In addition to the letter we have mentioned, which was addressed to Father Benedetto (Ep. I, pp. 1093-1094), we have other references to this in the Epistolario.

However, the modalities of these stigmata, which presumably have been visible at least once and which were known by very few people, are still hidden in mystery; for example, we do not know with certainty the date on which they manifested themselves for the first time, nor if Padre Pio was in constant pain or only on certain days or moments of his day.

At Padre Pio's school

The trials that Padre Pio had to endure as a consequence of his stigmata, were not less painful than the stigmata themselves. On the way to holiness it sometimes happens that the chosen person, by a special permission of God, becomes the object of misunderstanding. When this occurs, obedience becomes for them like a crucible of purification, on a path of progressive assimilation to Christ and strengthening in authentic holiness. To this regard, Padre Pio wrote to one of his superiors: "I act out of pure obedience to you, since the good God has shown me that this is the only thing acceptable to him and the only means by which I can hope for salvation and shout victory" (Ep. I, p.807).

When he became the centre of endless vile attacks, he lived by the words expressed in the First Letter of Saint Peter, which we have just heard, which became the rule of his existence: Cling to Christ, living stone (cf. 1 Pt 2:4) . In this way, he himself became a "living stone" for the construction of the spiritual building which is the Church. And for this today we give thanks to the Lord. "You too are living stones for the construction of a spiritual building" (1 Pt 2:5).

How pertinent these words appear when applied to the extraordinary ecclesial experience that grew up

around the new Blessed! Many, meeting him directly or indirectly, have rediscovered their faith; at his school, "prayer groups" have multiplied in every corner of the world. To those who flocked to him he recommended holiness as a way of life, and would say to them: "It looks like Jesus had nothing else to do but sanctify your soul" (Ep. II, p. 155). (JOHN PAUL II, *Homily for the beatification of Padre Pio of Pietrelcina*, May 2, 1999).