

# ***Mystics in the Spirit***

## An invitation to pray the Word

---

“

”<sup>1</sup>

*To further deepen, by praying, the spiritual dimension of our Salesian vocation, Fr Juan J. Bartolomé offers us two schemes of prayer: the first, based on the Pauline account of his vocation; the second, on the only account in the gospel of a vocation that failed. Although quite different, both underline the fact that to follow Jesus one has first of all to find him and then leave everything including what is good for the call, both the law of God and the good things of God.*

*Describing to the Galatians the origin of his vocation Paul reveals to them the essential reason for his apostolic passion: he was ‘found’ by the Risen Lord, and he found his life’s mission; a personal experience of God, which made him recognise His Son in his heart and led him to immediately preach the gospel. Without an encounter with God the believer does not encounter his vocation.*

*The recollection of the good young man who could not follow Jesus because he did not want to detach himself from his goods, becomes a constant warning for those who are following him today. If the fact that Jesus has counted on us without our being able to tell him that we have kept all the things God expected of us ought to make us blush, we ought to be even more ashamed of the fact that we continue to follow him while remaining attached to our goods, and that we seek in Him the Supreme Good and at the same time we continue to accumulate other goods.*

---

---

<sup>1</sup> An outline for reflection and work on the theme of the GC27, AGC 413 (2012) 63-64.

## **I. Encountering Christ so as to encounter one's own vocation: Gal 1,13-17**

Writing to the Galatians, twenty year after his 'conversion,' Paul recalls once again what happened on the road to Damascus. He does not make this confession as sharing a secret; it is rather an argument in defence of his gospel. He is not speaking to faithful new converts but to "foolish men" who "so quickly" are abandoning the grace of Christ and turning to another gospel (Gal 3,1; 1,6). The bitter and polemical tone of his words is unmistakable.

### **1. Understanding the text**

Founded by the apostle a short time before (Act 16,6; 18,23), the communities in Galatia had welcomed him " " (Gal 4,14) and they had believed his preaching and received the Spirit, and (Gal 3,2.5). Their first fervour unfortunately did not last long (Gal 1,6): the visit of some people who presented "a different gospel" (Gal 1,7) called into question the truth of the gospel preached by Paul, and even his apostolic legitimacy. The 'Galatian crisis' produced in the apostle the most enormous and unpleasant reaction among all those recorded in his letters (Gal 1,7-9; 4,17-20; 5,7-12; 6,12-14).

### **The immediate context**

*the only gospel* *God is the origin of his apostolate*      *the Son of God is*

### **The text**

To back up both these assertions, he begins to describe what he had done *before* and *after* his meeting with the Risen Lord, without giving a strictly chronological account of what happened. It is the model of what he also uses in Philippians 3: he clearly distinguishes between the pre-Christian stage and the first steps after accepting Jesus as his Lord, his changing from being a serious persecutor (Gal 1,13-14) to being a tireless missionary (Gal 1,15-24).

Both parts of his account, honest but in summary form, concentrate on the 'behaviour', that of the Jew and that of the Christian of the protagonist. The apostle gives the facts without any embellishments, nor does he seek the good will of his readers. While at first all he wanted was the destruction of the church, now he is completely dedicating himself to its expansion. Unlike Philippians 3, which focuses more on the actual significance of what happened, Gal 1 reveals something new, more objective and fundamental: *God was the cause of his change*. It did not consist so much in a change of behaviour as in a change of faith: "God " (Gal 1,16).

**ANTECEDENTS:*****a time of cruel persecution of the church (Gal 1,13-14)***

Paul does not appear to be ashamed of his past, now that he had become a recognised apostle he speaks about it to the Galatians. He does not have to repent having been an observant Jew, a zealous cultivator/practitioner of the traditions of his people and intransigent with those who did not observe them. Never does he show himself to be embarrassed or guilty; on that account therefore his position will be more sincere and authoritative: to inherit a faith and traditions which do not lead to Christ is of no use.

***<sup>13</sup> For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. <sup>14</sup> I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers.”***

Known to his readers, Paul does not hide his past. Rather, and in order to give more weight to what he will say later, he mentions it, limiting the Jewish stage of his life – about half of it! – to an intense persecution of the community in Jerusalem. He appears to recognise having done nothing else, as Luke reports, from the time of his youth (Acts 7,59; 8,1; 22,20; 26,10). And, in fact, he is the only one of the first persecutors of the church to be mentioned by name: “But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison” (Acts 8,3).

Not even here does Paul explain the reasons for such brutal anti-Christian behaviour. He is not interested in justifying it. He certainly declares his intention (*to persecute the church of God*), the effectiveness of what he was doing (*advancing in Judaism beyond many of his own age*), and the more personal motive (*being extremely zealous for the traditions of his fathers*). If he fiercely persecuted the followers of Christ it was not because he was a bloodthirsty or evil man, but because, being a convinced observer he could not abide defections nor deviations from the faith of his fathers. *From this extreme fidelity to the law God himself will free him.*

**CONSEQUENCES:*****called to know the Son and to proclaim him to the gentiles (Gal 1,15-17)***

Not only in Paul's letters but not even in any of the NT can be found a description of the event at Damascus superior to, or even comparable with this short autobiographical account.

***<sup>15</sup> But when God, who set me apart from my mother's womb and called me by his grace, was pleased <sup>16</sup> to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, my immediate response was not to consult any human being. <sup>17</sup> I did not go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went into Arabia. Later I returned to Damascus***

For this reason therefore it seems quite a shock that Paul should have given more significance to what he did 'immediately' after having been called, that is *to go into Arabia and then return to Damascus*, than to what God had done with him, *set him apart, called him, revealed his Son and converted him into his apostle*. If nothing more, from a syntactical point of view, the emphasis of the expression falls much more on the consequences *l'evangelizzazione immediata*, than on the fact itself, *God's benevolence* which made him know Jesus as his Son. Gli interventi di Dio si vedono, si 'misurano', negli effetti.

However Paul does not hide the fact that his being sent is also a pure gift: “by the grace of God I am what I am” (1 Cor 15,10). And, in fact, he does not present himself as a protagonist but as a grateful recipient of a gift as freely given as it was unexpected from God *within* him. If God’s action is something objective coming from outside, its actuation/implementation occurs deep within him, and becomes a totally private experience: it can be documented only in the results it produces, the unavoidable/inevitable mission.

Paul presents his apostolic vocation as *an experience of God* whom he now knows as the father of the Risen Lord, or better as God making himself known – disclosing himself, revealing in a definitive manner – his being the Father of Jesus. He has not come to this knowledge, ‘infused’ *by God*, through his own ability nor his fidelity. This ‘knowledge’ is the reason for his immediate apostolate: God had acted in him in an unexpected manner, and he at once goes to work among the pagans. God identified himself as the Father of Jesus and Paul feels himself to be, among the pagans, identified as being sent by him. His vocation is the consequence of an experience of God given by Him.

Paul does not become a less wicked nor a more zealous man. In him there was no change in behaviour nor the giving up of his Jewish faith. God gave him a new ‘insight’: he came to know the true identity of God (the Father of Jesus) and in that was revealed to him the true identity of Jesus (the Son of God). So new was this understanding that it became definitive (‘apocalyptic’), he felt it as divine benevolence in his favour; he saw it as a call which fills God with satisfaction, with pleasure. God felt good when he called him and revealed to him that he was the Father of Jesus. The encounter/meeting with the Risen Lord –Paul reminds the Galatians – was like a conversion, it was a two-fold recognition: coming to know that the God of Israel was in fact the Father of Jesus (Gal 1,16), and realising that he was being sent by Him to proclaim Him to the Gentiles (Gal 1,17).

This confession, central to an understanding of what happened is preceded by two statements, participial in the original, which integrate the conception of God that Paul had received: He is the One “*who set me apart from my mother’s womb*” and “*called me by his grace*” (Gal 1,15). Choosing, setting him apart, even before he was born and calling him to life from his mother’s womb are expressions which have been used to describe prophetic vocations (Jer 1,5; Is 49,1); Paul considers them to be appropriate in describing his experience and, therefore, presents himself too as a prophet, chosen by God. What is more, he recognises now (while he is writing to the Galatians), that always, even when he was not yet born, or during the time when he was persecuting the church, God had chosen him and destined him to be the evangeliser of the pagans; calling him to life he called him to the apostolate. For the whole of his life, including the long period as a zealous Jew and a ruthless persecutor, he had been favoured by divine benevolence. He becomes conscious of this, it is true, only when he comes to know Christ, when he feels himself sent to evangelise the gentiles.

Having been freely generous with Paul, God ‘educated’ him in giving freely in the mission, freeing him from serving the law of God in order to serve the Lord Jesus, the Son of God. Since his life as a persecutor did not prevent God from making him become the ‘apostle of the Gentiles’ (Rm 11,13), Paul understood that from now on his life would have no other purpose, no other meaning than that of proclaiming Christ and him crucified (1 Cor 2, 2): “<sup>16</sup>For when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, since I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!” (1 Cor 9,16). The one who is called does not do what he wants, nor live in order to fulfil his dreams; he has been found and sent to do the will of the One who loved him so much as to make him his representative and witness.

## 2. Throwing light on life

The 'conversion' of Paul was, in addition to being an unexpected change of 'occupation' (from persecutor to promulgator), *first of all and in itself an experience of God*. From this Paul's apostolic awareness comes and is rooted in it.

- *Behind my vocation is there a personal experience of God, earlier and unmerited? Could I too 'justify' the apostolate that I am carrying out through a discovery of Jesus the son of God? On what does my call rest, where does it find its confirmation and energy? By whom am I called, by the young or by God?*

Paul has a picture of the God who called him as a God who *was pleased* in calling him: God had 'found' satisfaction, pleasure, happiness when he arranged that Paul would find Jesus and would accept him as His Son.

- *Making Jesus known and recognised as His Son makes God the Father 'happy'. Does this fact make me 'happy' too? Am I aware that knowing Christ is always a grace that God gives me and a 'pleasure' that He – not I - grants? Why then do I not only seek the 'surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus (Philippians 3,8) to make God happy?*

After some time of apostolic life, when he was writing to the Galatians, Paul 'saw' the whole of his life – even the time when he was persecuting the church of God – as part of the journey in one single plan of God.

- *Why cannot I, as an apostle of Christ, succeed in understanding the whole of my life as an admirable history of salvation, even when I was not conscious of it or fully committed to my mission? Vocation to life and apostolic vocation coincide in God's heart; what will I do to make them compatible, or rather inseparable in my heart?*

Paul was aware of having been sent by God from the moment he heard God. His change of life was the result of a change – as perceived by him – in God: from the God of Israel to the God of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

- *In order to become the apostle God hopes me to be, to live the grace he has given me, don't I have to 'change' my idea about the personal relationship I have with God? Is the motive behind my apostolate to be found in God, a God who is generous and courteous?*

## **II. One leaves Jesus when He is not the only good: Mk 10,17-31**

Few Gospel texts have had such a profound and long-lasting effect/influence in the life of the Church as the episode of the rich young man (Mt 19,16-30; Mk 10,17-31; Lk 18,18-30). Together with other texts describing the demands of the following of Christ (for example. Mt 16,24; Lk 9,23.62; Lk 14,26.33), this account has come to be understood by Catholic tradition as the biblical foundation– if not the only one at least the main one – of the so-called 'evangelical counsels.' Curiously – and often it is a fact that goes unnoticed – the episode is the account of a vocation that failed.

### **1. Understanding the text**

Basically the episode is a lengthy dialogue in which Jesus takes the leading role. According to who his questioner is, whether it be an unknown man, the disciples, or Peter there are *three scenes*: the meeting between a young man and Jesus (Mk 10,17b-22), the comments Jesus makes to his disciples (Mk 10,23-27), the reaction of the disciples face with the radical approach of Jesus (Mk 10,28-31).

*The conversation between Jesus and the rich man* (Mk 10,17b-22) begins rather brusquely. Along the road Jesus is approached by someone who is not concerned so much about him as about himself, his own salvation. He does not ask any favour from Jesus, he only wants his advice (Mk 10,17.20). The meeting occurs as the result of a request by an unknown man. Jesus replies to the concerns of his questioner, if only apparently; in fact, he skilfully distracts him from his worries, somewhat self-centred, and proposes perfection to him. From being someone unknown he becomes someone loved.

<sup>17</sup> *As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him: "Good teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"*

<sup>18</sup> *"Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good—except God alone.*

<sup>19</sup> *You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honour your father and mother.'*

<sup>20</sup> *Teacher," he declared, all these I have kept since I was a boy*

<sup>21</sup> *Jesus looked at him and loved him:*

*One thing you lack," he said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follo*

<sup>22</sup> *At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.*

After the rich man goes away, Jesus *speaks to his disciples about his failure* (Mk 10,23-27). The scene opens and closes with the mention of the gaze of Jesus (Mk 10,23.27), who, in a kind of catechesis about entering the Kingdom emphasises the difficulty (Mk 10,23.24.27). The disciples, at first disconcerted (Mk 10,24), then their interest aroused (Mk 10,26), are the only ones to be given that lesson, and for once they understand it correctly. It is not simply a question of something that is difficult for men, but rather of something that is only possible to God.

<sup>23</sup> *Jesus looked around and said to his disciples,*

*"How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!"*

<sup>24</sup> *The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again:*

**“Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! <sup>25</sup> It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.**

**<sup>26</sup>The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other:**

**“Who then can be saved?”**

**<sup>27</sup>Jesus looked at them and said:**

**“With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.”**

Peter voices the *reaction of the disciples faced with the radical approach of Jesus* (Mk 10,28-31). The personal problem of the young man has completely disappeared from the narrative. Peter, who takes it for granted that he had done what the young man found impossible succeeds in obtaining from Jesus the promise of a reward for now and for later. Whatever has been left – and seven things are listed – will be taken into consideration.

**<sup>28</sup> Then Peter spoke up:**

**We have left everything to follow you!**

**<sup>29</sup>Jesus replied:**

**“Truly I tell you, no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel <sup>30</sup> will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—along with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life.. <sup>31</sup> But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”**

## **2. Throwing light on life**

### ***He was a good person who wanted to be better***

While Jesus was walking along an unknown man ran up and knelt before him. The man wanted to know *what he had to do* to gain eternal life. He knew he had to observe the law; and what was more important, he said he was ready to do whatever was asked of him.

Before replying, Jesus appears surprisingly critical; he does not accept that he should be granted what belongs only to God (Mk 10,18). Jesus’ reply is too obvious; without further comment or explanation he repeats the second part of the decalogue (Mk 10,19; cf. Ex 20,12-16; Dt 5,16-20): that is the will of the good God; his commandments indicate the path of life. The one who asked should know this.

The scene could have ended here: the man had received the reply he asked for. But, instead of going away, he confesses something that impresses Jesus (Mk 10,20). Jesus finds himself faced with someone who is not only ready to carry out what is asked of him but who is able to say that he has been doing so, all of it and always since his youth. He is drawn to that good young man (Mk 10,21). Before proposing to him a radical change, Jesus has changed radically in his regard. *That young man is the object of a superabundant love, and for this reason something more is expected of him.* The new demand made by Jesus is a proof of the love he has for him.

The only thing that he is lacking is to leave everything that he has, *to sell it*, give it to the poor and follow Jesus. The proposal Jesus makes is not a new condition to obtain eternal life. It is a new possibility to live that life of obedience to God that the young man is already doing so successfully. The giving up of all that he possesses is not however everything that is lacking to him but only a first step, a prior step that prepares for the definitive one: that of following Jesus (Mk 1,16-20; 2,13-17) and apostolic activity (Mk 6,7-13). He is not to give up his goods because they are evil, but their possession is not

to be preferred and is not even – in this case – compatible with the companionship of Jesus when one follows him: *burdened with goods, one cannot pursue the Good.*

In spite of his goodness the unknown man cannot accept the demands of Jesus. Without saying anything, sad and head lowered, *he leaves Jesus so as not to leave what he has* (Mk 10,22). He keeps his possessions but loses his joy and the good master. *His wealth had not prevented him from being a good believer, but it made it impossible for him to be a simple disciple.*

### ***How difficult it is to be in possession of goods and enter the kingdom!***

The gaze of Jesus precedes his teaching to those who remain around him. To possess the kingdom is difficult for someone who possesses wealth (Mk 10,23). Jesus no longer speaks about the 'impossibility' (Mk 10,27), he emphasises the difficulty (Mk 10,24). In addition, and this is surprising, he introduces here the theme of entering the Kingdom, whereas the invitation addressed to the good rich man was rather to follow him as a poor man.

The reaction of the disciples is quite logical. They cannot but be astonished by Jesus' affirmation. In Jewish religious tradition, wealth, far from being an impediment to entering the Kingdom, was proof of God's favour (Dt 28,1-14). The followers of Jesus understand that the difficulty in saving oneself was not limited solely to someone who possessed great wealth, but it applied to those who based their understanding of 'goods' on possessing them (Mk 10,24; Lk 6,20.24). Therefore, here, it is not the salvation of the rich man, but that of man as such that is under threat (Mk 10,26).

In the thought of Jesus, instead of diminishing the difficulty increases: it is not necessary to make use of one's goods, simply putting one's trust in them, even though in fact they are few, makes entering the Kingdom difficult. Jesus tries to make everyone aware that, *in comparison with God and his kingdom everything ought to be considered small and contemptible, to be thrown away*; the person who does not think of everything he has as insignificant, makes God insignificant. And to underline the problem Jesus makes use of an hyperbole. It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom (Mk 10,25). Allowing oneself to be possessed by what one has can lead to the loss of the kingdom one was waiting for.

The reaction of the disciples leads one to think that this time they have understood their Master very well (Mk 10,26). They were even more amazed but did not dare to question Jesus. They are distressed by the radical incapacity of man – not of the rich man! – to save himself. If even the good, being rich, could not succeed, who then could be saved?

Once again the gaze of Jesus precedes his words (Mk 10,27). He responds reaffirming the impossibility for man of obtaining salvation by himself. It is not that God's power finishes where man's comes to an end, the fact is that God's salvation knows no limits. Quite independently of what he is or has man depends on God. He does not need riches to ensure his salvation. *Everything is the gift of God and God is the only good not alienable.* Only He can save.

### ***How an indebted God compensates***

The spokesman of the disciples, Peter points out that unlike the rich man they had left everything, not just family and work (Mk 10,28). They lost everything to gain him, proclaims Peter, with obvious emphasis. The disciples say they have passed the test that



defeated the rich man. They are conscious of what they have given up; they are waiting for a comparable recompense: there will be something for someone who has left something.

Jesus replies with a promise that goes far beyond anything Peter intended or said (Mk 10,29). They can be sure that not only themselves but anyone who had given up something in their lives will be compensated. The list of possible renunciations is impressive. The list of people *possessed* is longer than that of things. Could it be perhaps because they constitute our best possessions? Or, indeed, because they are what we possess in the best way?

In any case the renunciation ought not to be generic; it has its own contents (property and loved ones) and two motives (Christ and the gospel). *Possessions*, whether one is dealing with good things or good people, *are not to be renounced for just any kind of reason*. In fact it is not any kind of reason whatever which makes them transient. *It is necessary to have good reasons for giving up the goods we possess*. Since only a relationship established with Christ and missionary activity are justification for giving them up, goods continue to be a good thing but they are not the best.

With the promised hundred-fold is ensured not only the recompense but also the divine commitment to see that it really happens. *It is the typical way God pays up*, his habitual way of acting, with those who listen to and do his will (Mk 4,7-20). The Christian fraternity compensates for the family left behind, but some danger/risk remains (Lk 12,52-53; Mk 13,12-13). Even though a generous one the present recompense is limited. Only eternal life is the real recompense for following the Lord; *only in the future will God totally repay his "debt" towards those who had left everything to follow Christ*. *Having a God indebted to us is the best guarantee of a future beyond all our hopes*. It is then that the last will be first (Mk 10,31).

### ***In the end: what is my (only) good?***

The memory of the rich man who could not become a disciple is a constant warning for disciples who want to be rich or, simply the first. Jesus's meeting with the rich young man (Mk 10,17-31), has as its theme the incompatibility between goods/possessions and the following of Jesus: *the only good of the good disciple has to be only Jesus* who he is following. Jesus does not allow/permit the good to preserve their goods in competition with him. From the one who wants to follow him, Jesus demands exclusive dedication.

- *The young man who could not stay with Jesus went to see him because he was really concerned about his own salvation. Could we not perhaps here identify one of the more frequent reasons for which we avoid meeting Him? Which of us nowadays goes in search of good teachers who will instruct us about the way of life? What is missing: teachers who point out the way and who accompany the effort to obtain eternal life or is it the desire to reach it?*
- *To the one who was good, Jesus proposes that he become perfect, inviting him to give up his goods. A form of goodness that is based on how much good is possessed is unworthy of a follower of Christ. Well then, how does one reconcile goods and /with Christianity? Why could Jesus classify the perfection of a good person according to the renunciation and giving up of what he possessed? Is it always true that the good(s) one possess(es) constitute an impediment to following Christ? What is my situation?*
- *If not even good people are saved/save themselves, no matter how rich they may be,*

*who will be able to enter the Kingdom of God? Could it be perhaps because God does not sell himself and cannot in any way be bought in exchange for anything no matter how great? Why is it necessary to detach ourselves from God's gifts in order to receive God as a gift? Is this really possible?*

- *Whoever leaves something for God will not be sorry: he will be given a hundredfold. Is this our actual experience? In any case, what could be the reason for it? Could it not be perhaps because having left something we believe we have a right to a great deal? If we detach ourselves from something do we put God in our debt or are we simply doing our duty? Do we deserve a reward for what we do or would it not be better to leave it to God to recompense us?*
-