

COMPONENTS OF ST. JEROME'S SPIRITUALITY IN THE LETTERS AND IN "OUR PRAYER"

Our Congregation is living a historical providential moment as we can see it in her spreading in the world. This spreading seems to open new horizons in the Somascan tradition. This event carries in itself great consequences whose impact can be intuited and delineated now, even though it will be only in the future when its fruits are understood. In a certain way, we live a season of sowing. The quality and the result of the harvest that will follow depend on the responsibility with which we relate to this time of grace ("kairós"), as well as depends the future of our Congregation. The unavoidable truth of this statement is imposing with the evidence of a history's great law. The development of an organism supposes and requires a correspondent growth in the awareness of its own identity, as an indispensable condition so that it may not crumble under its own weight (*mole ruit sua!*), but it may develop in accordance with its own potential in a real and fruitful unity, able to fulfill itself – without "crushing" – in socio-cultural contexts extremely differentiated among themselves.

In this perspective it is comforting to see that the issues of the identity, spirituality, and mission of the Congregation not only have accompanied the years of the renewal of the Constitutions according to the suggestions of the Vatican II and the following directives of the Church, but, despite the fact that improvements of methods and merits are necessary, they still continue to represent a priority interest. This is evident from the initiatives undertaken at different levels for discovering the vital directives and the program contents of the Constitutions, by meetings promoted for the deepening of St. Jerome's and his early companions' spirituality.

This work, that re-takes and develops the report given on August 31, 1994, during the Convention of Somasca for the 25th Anniversary of Ordination of Father General, Fr. Bruno Luppi, would like to offer a contribution for the knowing St. Jerome's spirituality, a contribution that deepens the results of the previous studies, and wants to present an attempt of synthesis to the critical reflection and the spiritual itinerary of those who are interested (1).

1. LEVELS OF APPROACH

In order to individuate and delineate the spirituality of a Saint, the scholars make moves on different levels that can be summarized thus:

a) A diachronic level that has the objective of pointing out exactly the time in which the Saint lived, and the historical-cultural matrix that exerted its influence on his spirituality and his work.

b) A genetic level, founded on the analytical research of the sources which are retraceable in his writings.

c) A synchronic-structural level, centered in the contents of the message that his writings develop and that the different methods of literary analysis – especially the structural approach- allow to gather, while pointing out the emerging guidelines and the degree of inner coherence.

d) A synthetic-hermeneutic level, directed to emphasizing the global vision of the spirituality of the Saint as a “word” that resounds in the today of an ecclesial community, of the Church, and of the whole world.

If it is obvious that the different approach levels interact among themselves, influence each other in the exploratory phase of research, and promote a unitarian comprehension of the figure and spirituality of the Saint, it is also certain that each one of them moves according its own methodological statute and offers a specific contribution necessary for a synthesis that wants to be founded in its premises, complete in its investigations, and objective in its conclusions.

The data we have recalled allow us to highlight the situation of the scientific research about St. Jerome. In this century, it has certainly seen a noticeable development at the diachronic level. The researches of Stoppiglia, Landini, Tentorio, Bianchini, and Pellegrini lay out a journey fruitful for the knowledge of St. Jerome’s life in the context of the social and ecclesial history of his time. The different contributions published in *Somascha* by Pellegrini, Scotti, Bonacina, and Casati continue to offer data and material that enrich and perfect our knowledge, and to prepare thus, little by little, the time for a new synthesis.

The search of the sources has been developed by Federici only about the presence and influence of the Bible in “Our Prayer” and by this author about the letters (2). It is a search that was more fruitful than it was expected in the beginning. Those who will approach the letters and “Our Prayer” will find a result: the texts are essentially permeated by a spirituality that can be characterized as biblical in its orientations, content, and language (3). If we ask about the influence that contributed to this spirituality, today we do not have a scientifically founded and global answer for we are lacking of an investigation developed with a critical and methodological rigor about the theological, spiritual, and ascetic sources verifiable in the letters and in “Our Prayer.”

As to the synchronic-structural and synthetic-hermeneutic levels we have to admit that the scientific research about the Miani’s spirituality is only at the beginning. It has been done a great effort at an existential-experiential level, either in the years of the Constitutions renewal or in the spiritual animation and in the conventions organized later on. The need to welcome the Spirit that makes us participants of St. Jerome’s charism – need that, as it is right to remember, has always accompanied the historical journey of our Congregation (4) – has been certainly felt with new accents and new longings in these thirty years after the Council. However, it is still true – and it would be a big mistake to forget it – that this existential dimension, though indispensable and irreplaceable, needs to be constantly enlightened by a scientific knowledge that allows to deepen the charism handed down by our Founder to his children, without the pretense or illusion of exhausting it. It is not a question of “hegemonic” realities (historical-economic-political), but “pneumatic;” for this reason the scientific knowledge never can be considered concluded and definitive. In other words, it does not offer a formula that fixes a static reality, but it always cast new solid bases for a journey where the experiential data and the scientific data, hand in hand, lead man (the Somascan!) in a constant growth in the Spirit’s experience and in the prophetic witness of God’s works.

Given the need of this scientific investigation, I think that the research on the Biblical sources allows us to harvest some fruits. The marked presence of Scripture, the evident structural relationship among the components of the Biblical spirituality, and the

perspectives that develop in an organic way from our texts make it possible and legitimate to right now outline some fundamental contents of St. Jerome's spirituality (synchronic-structural level) and put us on the way that leads us to the global vision that characterizes and manifests it as a Spirit's reality that grows in those who welcome it (synthetic-hermeneutic level).

We will develop the first aspect by pointing out the emergent lines of Miani's spirituality and analyzing the meaning of Christ's presence in his life of faith. Then, we will face the synthetic-hermeneutic aspect by expounding on the salient characteristics of Miani's spiritual experience, and locating the concrete possibility of a core in which all the characteristic components find their own organic placing and meaning.

2. EMERGENT LINES OF ST. JEROME'S SPIRITUALITY

The presence of the Bible in St. Jerome is not due to an exterior fact, or by chance or because of erudition; on the contrary, it is constant, coherent, and springs up from an inner tuning with the Word of God. These data do not emerge only from the explicit quotations and from the implicit references to Biblical texts, but they are manifest also in the fundamental contents of his spirituality which carry the strength and the richness of the great themes of the Scriptures. We present in a sketchy way these contents which constitute as many main components of Miani's spirituality.

a) God's Experience

The first part of the second Letter, with its structure greatly articulated (5), constitutes the main gate to know St. Jerome's experience in the existential and thematic richness of his spirituality. Here, we see Jerome living a God's experience that not only is in tune with the Scripture, but it expresses itself with its same language. God is the subject who acts in an absolute sense. "Jerome, his companions, their works..., everything exist because God is at work and is glorified by accomplishing great things in them" (6). We encounter here, in the same language of the Scripture, God's experience that is announced and sung in the Scripture. More concretely, it is the experience of the God of Exodus that is understood in the light of the Gospel and develops by uplifting itself to the apex of the "Magnificat." In reality Jerome experiences God whose power is manifested in liberation, whose love is not a pseudo-consoling illusion, but it is energy that, despite the trials and enigma of the present, unlocks a future full of life. Therefore, it is the God who now, within human history, manifests his glory through those who, like Jerome, want to let themselves be guided by the Holy Spirit and want to become the living space where Christ works (cf. 3 Let 3).

In this context, it is evident the relationship that God establishes in his design of love with the "brothers and children" of the Company of the Servants of the Poor: "He wants to put you in the number of his dear children" (2 Let 5) It is the filial relationship that the Saint perceives in its unheard richness, s it is confirmed by the Scripture.

For Miani, the filial relationship represents first of all the realization of the saving plan of the Lord ("wants") and as such, it is a divine reality that reaches man as an incomparable gift. Besides, the filial relationship is not perceived at a sentimental level

(7), but it is understood as the event of the saving insertion into the elect people (“in the number of his dear children”); therefore, a creative event, and by its nature, an ecclesial one. Finally, addressing to God as a father, for Jerome is a prophetic and eschatological reality: prophetic because it supposes an existence that is characterized by the experience of God’s love (“dear children”) and by the perseverance in his ways; eschatological because its fulfillment is only in the future and consists in the participation in the divine sanctity (“at the end, he made then saints”).

The richness of the filial relationship and of the experience of God as a Father is strongly confirmed by “Our Prayer.” Particular attention is deserved by the ‘sintagma’ “our Lord God and heavenly Father” (OP 7), because the term Father – as it happens in the NT (cf. James 1:27) – specifies the one of God and, at the same time, it finds in the mystery of the saving God (“our Lord”) its context. In other words, God is experienced essentially in the incomparable mystery of his fatherhood that, as a consequence, finds in the same mystery of God its source and meaning. Since the heavenly Father is “our Lord God,” divine fatherhood involves love communion that unlocks the energy of life, the guarantee of the future, and the pledge of resurrection. In this perspective, we can understand the fact that in “Our Prayer” the Biblical and evangelical expression “love the Lord” (cf. Dt 6:7; Mt 22:37 and parallels) is changed in “love his divine Majesty” (OP 8). For Jerome God’s “Majesty” is manifested in the saving glory of his fatherhood. (8) It is in the Father that occurs the revelation of the Holy God as “beginning, means, end, and fulfillment of every good” (OP 13), therefore of God as God.

The echo of the parable of the “lost” son in Lk 15 (cf. OP 14) underscores that if fatherhood characterizes God’s mystery, the filial condition characterizes the being of man in his relationship with God. This is clear in the awareness that the sinner is like the “prodigal son” of the Gospel and, as such, he is called to live his conversion as an itinerary towards the Father, itinerary made possible by the mercy of the Father himself who, by justifying, renews the filial identity in fullness. (9)

b) “Greta Faith and Hope”

A component emerges clearly from the simple reading of Miani’s letters and from “Our Prayer.” The spirituality of the Saint is characterized in a vital way by the trust in the Lord. The study carried out on the Biblical sources confirms this datum and allows us to have a glimpse of its singular depth and extraordinary potentiality (10).

The character of trust as essential component of Jerome’s spirituality appears, with particular force, in a statement that we find in the paragraph 6 of his second Letter. We quote the text so that we can highlight its chiasmic structure that distinguishes it and witnesses not only Miani’s depth of thought, but also its inner cohesion:

A “God does not perform his things
B in those who have not put all their faith and hope in Him alone:
B’ and those in whom there is great faith and hope,
A’ He has filled with love and made great things in them.”

The rich statement highlights that for the Saint the works of God, the “great things He makes,” consist of the effusion of his love that in man’s heart becomes source of love

towards everything (“He has filled with love”). At the same time, from the structure emerges with clarity that faith and hope are indispensable conditions for God to accomplish in man his work. Here, faith appears with the same meaning we meet in Scripture. It marks the existential attitude of the believer who accepts the security that comes from the Word of God, or better who accepts God as its only security: as a shield, refuge, support, defense, rock, and rampart. It is the faith of which Is 7:9b speaks symbolically, “if you do not accept the security (that the Lord gives you with his promise), you do not have any security,” and that clearly belongs to the same semantic field of hope and trust.

This trust in the Lord, as it has been demonstrated, represents the essential characteristic of the spirituality of the “anawim,” that is, those who had had the awareness of being the seed of the new and eschatological Israel. The voice of this spiritual current can still be perceived in many Psalms and in numerous prophetic and wisdom pages, while its ideal, in our opinion, is described as a program in the text of Sop 3:12-13a: “I will make remain in your midst a humble and poor people: the rest of Israel will trust in the name of the Lord.” Because of its prophetic-eschatological character the spirituality of the “anawim” has exercised a great influence in the life of the post-Christian communities and, therefore, inside the NT itself.

Two texts are both fundamental and meaningful for our discourse. First Mt 11:28-30, where the terms “meek and humble” referred to Jesus, in the Greek text are identical with the adjectives with which the LXX has translated the locution “humble and poor people” of Sop 3:12. In other words, Jesus has fulfilled, in the deep dimension of his being, the spirituality of the “anawim” and invites his disciples to learn from him by shouldering “his yoke”: the “yoke” of his revelation of the Father, because of which the life of the disciples is committed in a relationship of total trust in God and of unconditioned abandon to his “will.”

The second text is Lk 1:46-58 that contains the Magnificat. In this hymn, it is still possible to listen to the prayer of the “anawim” of the NT, whose model of faith, hope, and trust, according to the theological vision of the third Gospel, shines in a paradigmatic way in the Blessed Virgin Mary. The text quoted from Miani’s second Letter presents an evident allusion to the Magnificat in the expression “has made great things in them” (Lk 1:49). We meet a second reference to the Magnificat right after, when Jerome develops the consequence of what he has just stated: “Therefore, by not lacking in you faith and hope, he will make of you great things and will exalt the humble” (Let 6). In the main phrase of this paragraph, with a style that we find often in his letters, the Saint joins together two texts, in our case two versus of Magnificat (cf. Lk 1:49a. 52b). The “great faith and hope” appears here explicitly related to humility, understood in the sense of Magnificat (cf. the sintagma “the humility of his servant” in Lk 1:48) and therefore as an expression that marks the existential attitude of those who put “all their faith and hope in Him alone.” From the examination of paragraph 6 of the second Letter and from its structure, we can state that the spirituality of St. Jerome is the spirituality of the “anawim” and, as such, it draws from the vital sap of the Scripture and, in the NT, finds its model in Jesus and in the community, that makes its own the humility of Mary, “servant of the Lord.”

This datum that contains imponderable potentiality is confirmed by “Our Prayer.” Such confirmation has a particular value because the exhortation “let us trust in our

benign Lord and let us have hope only in Him...” (OP 6) has influenced the formulation of paragraph 6 of the second Letter (cf. besides the theme of hope the expression “in Him alone”). The intention of this exhortation is highlighted by the rubric that precedes it: “It follows the exhortation for asking for a true trust in the Lord.” The rubric, therefore, makes explicit the reason of the trust in the Lord, reason that represents the existential dimension – in the day-by-day of history- of those who put all their faith and hope only in the Lord, that of the “anawim.”

Enlightening it is also the paragraph 8 of “Our Prayer,” where the first grace asked of Christ, through the intercession of Mary, is to be “humble and meek of heart.” The reference to Jesus’ exhortation “learn from me who am meek and humble of heart” (Mt 11:29) is evident. The prayer that Jerome calls “Our Prayer” offers us the text in which Jesus is represented as the one who has fulfilled, in the fullness of his interiority (“heart”), the fundamental characteristic of the “anawim” and ultimately of the whole Scripture. St. Jerome has made his own this characteristic and has internalized it at the light of Magnificat, the hymn that places the theme of the “humble” in the context of the wonderful things performed by the Lord. As a consequence, the language of Magnificat helped Jerome understand the “humility” of Jesus in the perspective of God’s wonderful things and, therefore, of Christ’s saving mission. The exaltation of the humble is manifested in the witness of life: in their works (12).

c) Man as “servant of the Lord”

The Letters and “Our Prayer” presuppose and witness a significant historical datum. Those who joined St. Jerome form the “Company of the Servants of the Poor” (cf. 2Lett 1). Miani, who introduces himself to his brothers and children in Christ as “father” (cf. 2Lett 2), is known with the name “servant of the poor” (3Lett 30). The evangelical implication of this expression appears explicit in the letter where Jerome traces a close connection between the offering of oneself to Christ and being called “servants of Christ’s poor” (cf. 6Lett 4).

In reading the letters with the synchronic-structural method we find some perspectives that allow us to point out the rich theological-spiritual comprehension of this title in which Jerome and his companions have identified the meaning of their own offering to Christ and their mission.

First of all, by addressing to the “brothers and children” of the Company of the Servants of the Poor, Jerome states: “he (the Christ) wants also to use you poor things...” (2Lett 3). Being servants of the poor, therefore, expresses, in the historical dimension of existence, the realization of Christ’s design. Jerome sees himself and his own as instruments of God’s salvation that is realizing through Christ. Moreover, as we can see from the structural analysis, it is legitimate to state that the exaltation of the humble coincides with their becoming instruments of Christ’s salvation, the living place where God “performs his own things” and makes man a means of his design.

It is immediately evident the deep tuning of this language with the biblical theology centered in the expression “servant of the Lord.” With this title Scripture describes the prophets, presents the figure of the Servant described in the book of Isaiah, announces Moses as the mediator of the divine revelation, and outlines the condition and mission of Israel as people of the covenant who carries in his heart the word of his God.

In conclusion, the title “servant of the Lord” expresses the condition of the one whom God made come close to himself, invested with a particular mission, and made instrument of his design.

The tuning of Jerome’s experience with the biblical picture just pointed out is confirmed by a significant datum. It is the fact that, in Miani’s concept, the “good servant of the Lord” not only “hopes in him” (2Lett 7), but he also is the instrument through which God manifests his glory and realizes his salvation work. The expression that Miani prefers in this context is “through”. We find it referred to him in the 2 Letter, when the Saint, after having recalled his work of comforting “in Christ’s love and in the observance of the Christian rule,” notes: “the Lord is glorified in you through me” (2Lett 2).

The same concept is present again in the third Letter. Jerome, inviting Lodovico Viscardi to intervene “in a Christian way with some meek words” to enlighten a brother about a mistake of his, makes him observe that the Lord allows such a mistake not only so that he may learn to be patient and to know the human fragility, but also so that the one who erred “through your means may be enlightened and the heavenly Father may be glorified in his Christ” (3Lett 2). In my opinion, only a vital familiarity with the Word of God that can join Scripture knowledge with the wisdom experience of the Holy God, will allow to perceive and taste the sublimity and fecundity of this expression. With the awareness of moving only in an initial approach, we consider legitimate to state that, in Jerome’s perspective, being “servant of the poor” means being the “means” through which the heavenly Father is “glorified in his Christ.”

Through the servants of the poor, therefore, God shows his “glory,” realizing now, in “this world,” the participation of the believers in the “future world,” that world that with the resurrection of his Son (“in his Christ”) made his saving irruption in the present of the human history. The aspect that mostly draws our attention is the strong theological connection, implicit in the saying, between the “service” to the poor, the glorification of the heavenly Father, and the resurrection of the Jesus Messiah. Keeping in mind that the resurrection is the foundation of being Christian (cf. “risen with Christ” in Col 3:1), and therefore of the relationship between the baptized and the Father, we can state that, for Jerome, being servant has a deep correlation with the mystery of divine fatherhood, revealed and communicated by the Risen one and in the Risen one.

In fact, what Miani considers necessary “to think” is that “Christ works in those instruments who let themselves be guided by the Holy Spirit” (3Lett 3). In other words, the Father is glorified in his Christ and in him he shows the working power of his love (“only God is good”), because the Son “works” in those who open themselves to the guide of the Spirit (13).

This text that moves with spontaneous simplicity and joyful familiarity at the heights of the Trinitarian mystery offers some enlightening data. First of all, the category of “instrumentality,” that here appears in its extraordinary beauty and positivity. Man becomes the “means,” the “instrument” in which God reveals his love, as far as he is guided by the Spirit and therefore becomes the place where Christ “works.”

Second, it is emphasized the greatness of man who, in his inner freedom (“want...”), opens up to the guidance of the Spirit. To the design of Christ, who “wants” to use man, it corresponds the free answer of man, who directs all his life in the light of the Spirit. Here we perceive an inner experience that develops in the dynamism of the

evangelical wisdom, without indulging in moralistic misunderstandings. What counts is not the “perfection” of single moments, concretely impossible to man, but the “perfection of the heart,” that is the total and permanent direction of one’s being toward the guidance of the Spirit. The believer who develops this itinerary “of faith in faith” (cf. Rm 1:17) becomes, thanks to the Spirit’s action, the “instrument” of God’s glory “in his Christ.”

The “instrumentality” of the servant, at last, is presented interiorly connected with the reality of the works. This theme, that in Jerome and our tradition presents a singular theological and spiritual richness, still lacks of an appropriate scientific research (14).

d) Steadfast in Tribulations

The spirituality of St. Jerome manifests his depth and greatness in the theological-existential interpretation of “tribulations,” of the moments when man walks in the enigmatic darkness of difficulty and his existence finds itself in a vital space that more and more closes in till it does not allow a glance at a possible way out and liberation. The adjectives “redoubled, afflicted, tiresome, and, lastly, despised by all” (2Lett 3) in a suggestive and effective way recall this dramatic situation which had invested the “Company of the Servants of the Poor,” to the point of threatening its survival (15). Jerome’s language is not at a level of observation that just photographs the situation; his words, rather, have a strong value, for the Saint discovers the meaning of “tribulations” in the existential journey of the believer and, at the same time, points out its solution by recalling the Biblical view of the “anawim.” The image of the weary-oppressed of Mt 11 and the one of the “humble” in Magnificat outline with transparent depth the faith perspective where Miani stands in order to face “tribulation” and to overcome it.

In other words, difficulty is not ignored nor sublimated; on the contrary, in an eloquent tune with the Scripture, it is faced with the strength of faith that, in its turn, is existentially nourished, enlightened, and corroborated by the Lord’s Word. Really, for Jerome, the expressions “to stand steadfast in tribulations” (cf. 2Lett 7) and “stand strong in faith” (cf. 2Lett 6) are in a constant relationship of reciprocal connection, to the point that we can rightly state that they belong to the same semantic field.

The relationship existing between faith and “tribulation” is outlined by Jerome with the Biblical category of “trial”: “to try you as gold is tried in the furnace” (2Lett 7). This expression of the unmistakable wisdom flavor recalls biblical texts such as 1Pt 1:7 and Sir 2:5. Particularly enlightening for us is the page of Sir 2: 1-11 where the motif of trial is directly correlated to the great themes of Torah and of the prophetic tradition: “to serve the Lord” (v 1), “temptation” (v 1), “patience” (v 4), “hope” (v 6), “fear of the Lord” (v 7), “trust” (v 8), the “benefits” of the Lord and the gift of “eternal happiness” (v 9), at last, the reflection on the past generations in order to confirm the acting of the Lord toward those who remain faithful in the trial (vv 10-11). The thematic correspondence between St. Jerome’s spiritual language as it appears in an emblematic way in the first part of the second Letter (paragraph 1-8), and the pages of Sir 2 is evident and surprising. We need to specify that this parallelism does not allow us to sustain in scientific terms a literary dependence of Jerome on Sir 2. However, it is undeniable that a similar correspondence constitutes a further and suggestive confirmation of the real tune that exists between the Saint’s experience and the central and fundamental themes of Scripture’s theology and spirituality.

In this context, it is still useful to note the in the inner connection that Jerome sees between being God's children, faith, and trial. The believer who stands "steadfast in tribulations" opens up to God who "increases" his faith "in him alone and not in others," and therefore, he finds himself inserted in that saving dynamism that characterizes the acting of the Lord with his friends (2Let 5), all the saints, according to the fundamental theological paradigm of Exodus (2Let 7). It is the dynamism of liberation that is happening in the measure with which God puts one in the number of his children. The structural analysis of the first part of the second Letter allows us to legitimately state that for Jerome our "being children of God" is not a static reality (that we can lose with our sin and recover with conversion), but a reality highly and vitally dynamic, a reality that, for those who believe and persevere in God's ways, grows constantly till the reaching of fulfillment in "the promised land" of eternity (16).

A similar dynamism reflects in a stupendous way the perspective of NT for which our being children of God, creative work of the Holy Spirit, grows in proportion with our transfiguration in Christ, till the reaching of the fullness with the resurrection of our body (17). This datum not only confirms the biblical-wisdom intelligence of the trial as we have described before, but also witnesses that Jerome's experience is a bearer of a rich, strong message formed by God's Word. A reflection on the Saint that moves only at a sentimental or moralistic devotion, no matter what the new forms and words it may take up, remains inevitably outside the spiritual experience of Miani, and therefore, it deforms it if not betrays it.

3. CHRIST IN THE SPIRITUALITY OF MIANI

Faith in the risen Lord, understood in the light of the Scripture's prophetic and apocalyptic tradition, has developed in the proto-Christian communities the certainty that the saving relationship with the Holy God is realized in the participation in Christ's life. He is "the Risen," or better, "the Resurrection and the Life," because he fulfilled the Scripture's promises and inaugurated the new world of resurrection. In their confession of the glorified Lord, the baptized, even though they are of this world, experience of no longer being of this world for they belong to the world that has made its own the resurrection of the Risen one. They walk in the new life of the Lord (cf. Rom 6:1-11) to the point that we can explicitly affirm that they have "risen with Christ" (Col 3:1). That means that God's salvation, announced by Scripture, is carried out by and revealed in the glorified Christ, and therefore, in the measure in which man, through faith and love, lives in Him and with Him (18).

This promise opens us the way to understand St. Jerome's spirituality in relationship with the central and fundamental datum of the NT faith: the resurrection of the Lord. In a previous study I have demonstrated that St. Jerome's spirituality has a clear Easter nuance (19). In effect, as we can see from the expression "in Christ" we find at the beginning of his letters, for the Saint all the relationship of fatherhood, brotherhood, sonship have their place in the risen Lord, sole foundation of the new existence of the saved ones (cf. Gal 2:26-29; 1Cor 1:30).

From the fact that the interpersonal relationships of the Company's members are located "in Christ" derives the vital importance that for Jerome is the need of "staying

with Christ” (1Lett 5). It is a formula in which it is reflected the NT language of the disciples and apostles’ call (20). As it is evident from the tone of the whole expression (“if the Company stay with Christ, we will have our goal, otherwise everything is lost”) and from the context in which it is located, it is the essential condition “stantis vel cadentis Societatis.” Effectively, the divine call and the perseverance in vocation “till the end,” for Miani, are reduced to “staying with Christ.”

The perspective right now recalled allows the understanding of the consequences the Saint infers from this essential datum for the future of the Company: “therefore, pray to the pilgrim Christ by saying: Stay with us, Lord, for evening grows near.” (1Lett 5) Here, we can see that “staying with Christ” is not, first of all, man’s work but gift of the risen Lord who renews for those who are his disciples His Easter presence and revelation. It follows that being in Christ and staying with Him are His work, and therefore, they are the historic-existential expression of his glorious presence and his saving action.

A text allows us to better point out the perspective in which Jerome understands, at an existential level, the presence of the Risen One: “Christ works in those instruments who wants to let be guided by the Holy Spirit” (3Lett 3). For Miani, those who orient their existence in such a way that they are guided by the Spirit become the place where the Risen One accomplishes his work, by revealing the saving power (“glory”) of the Father. The context of this expression shows that in the idea of the Saint the believer becomes the space of Christ’s work and the instrument of the Father’s glory, “in His Christ,” when he lives communion and personally assumes the responsibility of charity with all its requirements, including the one of the brotherly correction (21).

A careful study of the letters’ language and of “Our Prayer” shows again that for Miani faith in the Risen One is the source of the memorial of the cross through which the disciple becomes more and more aware of his participation in the glorious life of the Kurios and can “despise all the things of the world,” realizing and manifesting in his existence the evangelical values which belong to the world of resurrection. They are typical values of those who, according to the nice expression of John, are still in this world but they are no longer of this world, as far as they belong to the Risen One (cf. Jn 17:9-14): mercy, goodness, humility, meekness, patience, bearing with one another, reciprocal forgiveness, and above all, love (22).

Faith in the Risen One is, moreover, the source of that experience of “enlightenment” and “revelation” that for Miani represent the spiritual atmosphere where the life of his companions develops. This is evident from his frequent exhortation in his letters to act according to “what God inspires,” “what Christ inspires,” “what the Lord shows” (cf. OP 13.15). Here too the language recalls a theme that is fundamental in the NT experience where the full revelation, together with the familiar communion with the Lord and the victory of life over death, constitutes a characteristic of the new world of the resurrection (cf. Mt 11:25-27; 1Cor 2:6-16; Ep 1:15=19; Jn 1:18; 17:3-6).

At last, for Jerome, faith in the Risen Lord is source of love that makes the life of the believer a “diakonia” to Christ in the person of his poor. According to “Our Prayer” the poor are brothers “entrusted to be served” (OP 10). The verb “to serve” that marks the life of Jesus as “servant of the Lord” is also a characteristic term that specifies Miani’s and his disciples’ life. The same evangelical perspective we can find in the sixth Letter where it is presupposed that the poor are “of” Christ, with the consequence that the offering of oneself to Christ expresses itself necessarily in the evangelical “diakonia” to

the poor. Wonderful in its simplicity and depth is the idea that supports the message of 6Lett 4: the presence of the poor, entrusted by God to the zealous love of the Company, makes everything Christ's property: his is the house where the poor live, his is the bread the members of the Company eat for they are "servants of the poor" (23).

The picture that appears from these data is clear and enlightening. God's experience, faith and hope, being servant of the Lord and steadfast in tribulations, everything is lived "in Christ." Christ constitutes the vital horizon of St. Jerome's spirituality.

4. CHARACTERISTICS OF ST. JEROME'S SPIRITUALITY

The spirituality of a saint is characterized by both the contents of his own experience and personal attitudes with which he has lived his experience. The analysis of the letters and "Our Prayer" at a structural and biblical-source level has offered precious data. Thanks to them it is now possible to outline in a synthetic-hermeneutical perspective the characteristics of St. Jerome's spirituality both at the level of its contents and in its existential dimension.

* * *

In developing a schematic outline we can state that, *under the profile of the contents*, St. Jerome spirituality presents the following characteristics:

a) *Trinitarian*. It is an experience that is supported by the (saving) power of the Father, by the wisdom of the Son (in whom the design of the Father is revealed and realized), and by the strength of the Spirit (who makes man the space where is glorified "the heavenly Father in His Christ"). The Trinitarian dimension appears in Jerome not at a level of an abstract speculation but of vital experience in faith, an experience that is deeply and constantly illumined and enriched by the Word of God. The study of "Our Prayer" has showed that it reflects a "Christological-Pascal" reading of the Scripture, and in a special way, of the Psalms. For this reason the language on God, both in the letters and in "Our Prayer," is pervaded by the terms of love, sweetness, tenderness, and benignity, as well as by those of glory, power, and majesty. St. Jerome's spirituality, in other words, developed in a marvelous tuning with the experience of God's love witnessed by the Scripture; love that "pilgrim Christ" continually reveals and gives; love that works and transforms, converts and illumines the existence of those who offered themselves to Christ and are called "servants of the poor."

b) *Christological-Pascal*. The presence of this characteristic, already demonstrated previously (24) and farther developed in this same work, assures that St. Jerome's experience takes the form of a spirituality that draws from the heart of the Gospel, is based on the joyful proclamation of the Lord's resurrection and, in the light of this faith, develops the awareness of a humanity called to live in the experience of the communion with the Father, and therefore, to walk on the way of peace, charity, and prosperity.

c) *Ecclesial*. It is a characteristic that deserves to be examined because of its peculiar richness and originality it contains. At a theological level the decisive statements are in “Our Prayer.” The prayer addressed to the “our sweet Father Lord Jesus Christ” so that he may reform Christianity “to that state of holiness that was of the Apostles” (OP 3) shows that “holiness” is the fundamental category of the Church’s mystery, its essential hermeneutical principle. This datum is confirmed by the intentions addressed to God for his Church in paragraph 9. In fact, here too the Church is not characterized first of all by its glorious condition in heaven or pilgrim on earth, but uniquely by its holiness, hence by its communion with the Holy God, through the participation in the life of the risen Lord. This vision illumines the configurations of the Church for which we raise our prayer: the Church “most perfect in heaven,” the one “perfect on earth,” the one imperfect on earth, the imperfect one in purgatory, at last the Church that is still potential constituted by “those who can be his Church,” they too called to be “perfect” and “most perfect” in the divine holiness. In this last petition, as we can notice, we encounter “a missionary moment of the text that is really marvelous” (26). Really, the understanding of the Church in the light of holiness leads to the view of a humanity called to participate in the life of the Holy God.

d) *Anthropological*. Both letters and “Our Prayer” witness to a spirituality that regards and reaches man in the wholeness of his being and existence. Jerome’s view is diametrically opposed to the idea of those from whom spiritual life means a reality completely antithetic to the corporeal dimension of man. For Miani, faith places man’s wholeness in the dynamism of the guidance of the Spirit making him the means through which Christ works and reveals his Father. The constant attention to the most concrete aspects of the daily life, both at a material (health, work, meals, etc.) and spiritual level (prayer, formation, sacrament of penance, decision interventions, pastoral care, etc.), are in this sense eloquent witnesses. It is present the right view of everything that pertains to the temporal goods, view that has two interesting witnesses in “Our Prayer” when he presents guilt as wasting every our “spiritual and temporal” good (cf. OP 14) and when he invokes the heavenly Father that “in the future he may deign to help us in all our temporal and spiritual needs” (OP 7). The witness where this anthropological dimension is expressed with simplicity and clarity is in the Trinitarian invocation to the power of the Father, the wisdom of the Son, and strength of the Spirit. In this passage the “brothers and children” of the Company through the prayer they raise with the intercession of the “glorious” Virgin Mary, beg the grace for being guided “in the way of peace, charity, and prosperity” (OP 5). To interpret the term “prosperity” in the sense of “spiritual growth” is to misunderstand the text of “Our Prayer” where they pray for the temporal and spiritual needs. Here the term “prosperity” means a life condition that allows to welcome and support the poor youth, form it Christianly and professionally, make it capable of facing life responsibility with dignity and coherently commit to Christian witness, as well as, when possible, devoting to the faith proclamation generously.

e) *Exodus*. It is not out of place to use this term since in his second Letter Miani himself describes, with a suggestive language, the liberation of the Lord’s people from Egypt in order to point out the way with which God has operated with all the Saints and continues to act with the “brothers and children” of the Company (Cf. 2Let 7-8). In

reality, Jerome sees his work as a participation in the acting of God who manifests his fatherhood through the liberation of his children, the guidance of them on the way of peace, charity, and prosperity. In this context we can see the motif of the way that belongs to the symbolic patrimony of humanity. It refers to God's ways in which Jerome invite to persevere. Or better, it becomes the "holy way" on which only the Lord can make us walk "in truth," that is, really and in tuning with his love design. Therefore, the theme of the way describes the journey of the life that God unlocks to man so that he may fulfill his itinerary towards Him, by persevering in faith and hope and by becoming the "instrument" that God fills with love, constitutes the witness of his wonderful works of salvation, and is the means of his glory.

f) *Diaconal*. For Jerome it exists a connection between being offered to Christ and being called "servants of the poor of Christ" (6Lert 4). In other words, the charismatic and apostolic experience Miani lives with his companions realizes the self-offering to Christ in the "diakonia" to the poor. Therefore, the expression "for all our other brothers who are entrusted to them so that they may *serve* them" (cf. OP 10) is particularly enlightening. It shows that in the solemn moment of prayer the different categories of poor, reached by the charity of Jerome and his companions, are not pointed out only with terms which reflect their socio-economic condition, but they are called "brothers": the brothers God entrust in order to be served. Here it appears especially the theological character of the verb "to serve" that recalls the image of the Son of Man come "not to be served, but to serve" (cf. Mt 20:28 and par.). In St. Jerome and his companions, Christ "works" by making them participate in his prophetic "diakonia" that expresses itself in the love that arrives to its fulfillment with the gift of his life. In this perspective it is also evident that the term "brothers" does not derives from a language foreign to the drama of the poor's existence and it does not reflect an aseptic language that betrays a disinterest for the real problems of men or may even impress upon "the poor" a passive resignation and a passivity resigned to their unjust situation. Miani's "brotherhood" has a theological-existential note that carries the prophetic force of the Scripture and Gospel. In reality, Jerome considers the poor as a brother and acts consequently for he is moved by the same love that moved Jesus. Only those who are guided by Christ's Spirit journey on the way of the human liberation and promotion, and realize and witness in any existential and social situation the values of justice and love.

It is significant that "Our Prayer", by calling Jesus with the title "sweet Father of us all" supposes and underlines that in Him, servant of the Lord, it is revealed in a full and definite way the ineffable mystery of God the Father. In similar way, Jerome who lives his own offering to Christ as "first servant of those poor" (Manuscript 30) witnesses in his letters the experience of a fatherhood that gushes out from the guidance of the Spirit, translates in time Christ's work, and makes present the Father's love and tenderness. As for Christ, so for St. Jerome fatherhood and brotherhood constitute the coordinates of his "diakonia": a serving that reaches man in his social and historical reality, but at the same time that does not exhaust itself in the limits of immanency since it gushes out from God and pens to man the way that leads to God. The "diakonia," in other words, is authentic evangelical "martyria," is the witness of a life really offered to Christ.

g) *Ecumenical*. The supplication made to the Lord Jesus that he may “reform” all Christianity to that state of holiness that was at the times of the Apostles (cf. OP 3) contains a message whose potential still needs to be individuated and explained. The ecumenical movement developed in this century has arrived to understand that the divine design “that all be one” will be realized when all the Christian churches express in themselves the holiness of the times of the Apostles and can therefore manifest themselves to the world as expressions of the only Church who, in the unity of communion, witnesses the only God and Father, the only Lord, and the only Spirit. The text that Jerome calls “Our Prayer” moved in this direction already in 1535 (27), in a period when between the Church of Rome and the one that was recognized in Luther’s reform there raged a violent controversy that would reach the explosive level of vulgar and uncompassionate insults. The perspective of the holiness of the apostolic time, understood in the light of Jn 17, contains the central and permanent core of any spiritual itinerary that intends to effectively work for the “reform” of all Christianity.

h) *Missionary*. A missionary characteristic of the spirituality of St. Jerome can be seen in “Our Prayer” where it is invoked the “light of faith” for all those who are reached by the proclamation of the Gospel, both in this present time and in the future. By considering the latter with the Church’s category of “potential,” that will realize and develop in time (“his Church that can be”), the text unlocks a great perspective. On one hand, the mission appears essentially correlated to the being of the Church itself, on the other all humanity is seen in its vocation to form the “Church of God.” The light of faith, at last, constitutes the horizon of the Church who lives with Christ in God (cf. Col 3:3), and represents for this the fundamental way of the vocation with which God calls all men to himself. In this view, the proclamation of faith is authentic evangelical “diakonia” for the life of the world. Right in the light of this “diakonia” Jerome develops the spirituality of those who offers to Christ in serving his poor (28).

Besides the contents, the letters and “Our Prayer” allow to outline some characteristics of St. Jerome’s spirituality which are related to his *living experience*, such as his interior attitude with which he has welcome and understood his own God’s experience, that is, his spiritual self-awareness. Considered in this way, St. Jerome’s spirituality can be outlined with the following notes:

a) *Prophetic*. Jerome presents himself explicitly as a prophet who, when necessary, admonishes and announces “on behalf of Christ” the chastisement (cf. 6Lett 3-4). We need however to note that the prophetic character of St. Jerome’s spirituality is based more than on the term “prophet” and the verb “to prophesize” on the fact that he has the awareness of speaking in the name of the Lord (“the Lord makes me say it,” “I say the truth”). What he says – this is the inner certainty of Miani – comes from God and as such it must be listened to if the addressees have the fear of God.

It is significant that the scientific research in the Biblical field has come to understand that the specific component of a prophet, according to Scripture, has not to be looked for

formally in the prediction of a salvation far in time, but in the personal experience of God who invests the called one to the point that he acts and speaks in order to announce to the people what the Lord “tells” him. To the “prophetic” awareness of St. Jerome it belongs the clear awareness that his word is the concrete “means” with which God manifests his presence and his plan (cf. 6Lett 5). The importance of the word announced in the name of God appears also in the third Letter where the Saint distinguishes between the written letters and speaking “alive the words of life” (3Lett 3). This expression opens an air-hole on the importance that Miani attributed to the interpersonal talking and at the same time it shows that the ultimate goal of his interventions was to communicate “the words of life,” the words that orient man in his wholeness to the Lord (conversion), to introduce him in the merciful love experience of the Lord, and to give him the strength to persevere in truth on the holy way of God.

At last, we notice that the prophetic awareness in Miani does not manifest only in words, but especially, as in the Scripture’s prophets, in life, therefore “with facts and words” (2Lett 2). Jerome knows he is a “means” through which the Lord manifests his glory. The fact that he calls also his companions to be a “means” through which the brothers are illumined and “the heavenly Father is glorified in his Christ” (3Lett 2), shows that for Miani the prophetic dimension characterizes the spirituality of those who offered themselves to Christ and are in the world as “servants of the poor.”

b) *Wisdom like*. It is an aspect that has been pointed out during the research for the report given in Somasca and is now issued for the first time. Therefore, I think necessary a brief demonstration of this component, especially because it is destined to exercise a determinant influence on the future comprehension of Miani’s spirituality.

A careful reading of his letters allows us to see that in Jerome are constantly present some of those components of that “empirical” wisdom that stands as the basis of all the historical journey of humanity. Without the pretense of been exhaustive in the quotation, we recall some witnesses particularly evident in this sense. In the important cases, such as the election for an office, Miani foresees that those to whom pertains the deliberation must mature their decision “through counseling and examining the case at length and with prudence” (2Lett 13). In the binding and vital decisions, such as work, it is necessary to move only when one “sees” the “way” and the “how” (cf. 3Lett 18). Another datum is the needs of translating in actions the established projects without stalling uselessly at the level of desires: “the others complain and have this desire with words, and we have shown the desire with facts” (3Lett 13).

To the wisdom empirical attitude we also owe the genesis and the use of proverbs. It surely belongs to this category the saying “don’t spur the running horse” (3Lett 16). Similarly, the expression “those who do not work, must not eat,” that probably alludes to 2Tes 3:10, presents the characteristic of a proverb in a style stronger and more emphasized than the correspondent Pauline expression. To the wisdom kind of proverbs it also belongs the statement “it is better that one suffers rather than the whole Company may be troubled” (2Lett 18) (29).

The “empirical” wisdom in Jerome appears deeply connected with faith, from which it draws inspiration and is formed. As we know, in the phase of “religious” wisdom, Israel understood that true wisdom (also in its empirical dimension) is a gift of the Lord. We find the same awareness in St. Jerome. Miani, in fact, with his wisdom language

shows the conviction that the believer is in the happy possibility to accomplish with wisdom and justice the required choices only in those situations in which “the Lord shows something and it is clear that it is His” (1Lett 3). It derives, as logical consequence, the need of “praying the Lord that He may teach us to draw everything to a good end”(3Lett 6). More over, so that the choices be enlightened, and do not remain in the mere field of desire, it is indispensable “to pray much and beg that we may see and, by seeing, we may work *what right now I may need.*” Said in other terms, it is essential to realize what in reflection and prayer comes to the awareness of the believer as God’s plan and, therefore, as a choice that has the characteristics of being good and concretely feasible.

In Scripture the highest peak of wisdom reflection is represented by the pages of the personified Wisdom. Wisdom, personification of the Lord’s plan, is contemplated and described in his full participation in the saving-royal function of God Himself (cf. Job 28; Prov 8:22-9:6; Wis 7:22-8:1). They are pages that have exercised a decisive influence on the NT Christology, orienting in understanding Jesus as “God’s Wisdom” (cf. 1Cor 1:30; 2:6-10). Also this component is present in “Our Prayer” where, at the side of expressions that recall the wisdom language of the Bible (30), we have the syntagma “the wisdom of the Son” (OP 5). By inserting the “wisdom” of the Son between the “power” of the Father and the “strength” of the Holy Spirit, “Our Prayer” prefers and wants to promote the contemplation of the sweet Lord Jesus Christ in the biblical light of the divine Wisdom, who – according to the proto-Christian reading of Sir 24:1-21 – exercises his saving lordship on the peoples and pitches his tent among the holy people of the Lord in order to reveal the Father.

The wisdom dimension of St. Jerome’s spirituality finds a splendid confirmation in the third Letter where Jerome, quoting the proverb “the disciples are according to the master” (3Lett 24), clearly shows that he sees a master-disciple relationship between himself and his own. Even here, however, it surfaces the fascinating originality of Miani who, on one hand specifies his being “master” not in view of teaching (31), but in the perspective of exemplarity, and on the other, he resolves the master-disciple duo in the master-cooperator relationship that tends to make people strongly co-responsible (32).

The expression “pray... that God may give them a better master and me better cooperators” (3Lett 24) opens a luminous perspective on a further fundamental aspect of Jerome’s spirituality. In fact, in these words we see a life stretching toward improvement, toward a continual growth in goodness, according to the image of the good gold that “is preserved and grows in value (literally *goodness*)” (2Lett 7). This orientation witnesses that in Miani the wisdom quest did not develop in an aesthetic or theoretical horizon, but in a vital perspective and therefore, constantly turned to the daily authenticity of human existence. Here we have the intuition of the greatness and fruitful potentiality of his spirituality. Despite numerous rationalizing and psychologizing semblances it is easy today to perceive even in some spiritual tendencies the danger of resolving the transcendent in the immanent, the divine in the human, theology in anthropology. Far from plunging Wisdom in the dispersion of the daily existence, Jerome enthrones the daily existence in the heart of Wisdom. In other words, he enlightens the existence of every day life with the light of faith and orients it to tune in with God’s plan, in the constant quest of “seeing” what He “shows” and in the existential openness to the Spirit that makes “better” those who let themselves be guided by Him (cf. Wis 9:17-18).

c. *Prayerful.* The letters reveal that the Saint has assimilated the Word of God and the liturgical prayer of the Church in a vital way. His prayer appears as a continual and growing experience of God and his “benign mercy.” It is an experience of Christ who remains with us and allows us to stay with him, who illumines the eyes of our blindness, who converts us from our weaknesses, and opens us to the guidance of the Spirit. A particular importance assumes the prayer of intercession, as it appears both from his frequent invitation to pray so that God may illumine, show, covert, make better, and in a symbolic way from the awareness that Jerome has of interceding as new Moses for his own in the hour of difficulty and fight (33).

In the light of the data acquired in this research, a question arises: among the many characteristics that come together to outline the face of St. Jerome’s spirituality, is it possible, at a hermeneutical level to discern a core that may illumine all of them and toward which all of them may converge? The many components that emerged in the previous analysis orient toward an affirmative answer. In my opinion, the vital core of Miani’s spirituality is constituted by the “fatherhood”: God’s fatherhood that is fully revealed in “sweet Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” and in which Jerome has the awareness of participating.

Synthetically, we can state that St. Jerome’s mission is identified with his being a “father.” As a father he is a “teacher” who forms and a “servant” who understands his fatherhood in the line of Christ-servant. In this perspective, being “father” concretizes in a twofold relationship: with God and men. In fact, fatherhood in St. Jerome appears essentially as correlated to the “heavenly Father,” for whom any fatherhood is derived, and at the same time, it is totally oriented to the poor. In his reference to the poor of Christ, fatherhood is expressed as evangelical “diakonia” of life that generates by giving itself until the total accomplishment of God’s design.

5. OBSERVATIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

The data emerged from this work allow us to state, with scientific foundation, that St. Jerome’s spirituality mirrors a God’s experience so harmonious in its contents and intimately tuned with the Scripture that it constitutes an authentic form of life “in the love of Christ and in the observance of the Christian rule” (2Lett 2). It is a spirituality that contains innumerable riches because it is springing from the heart of the Gospel (“Christ works...”), has assimilated and witnesses in a prophetic way the central themes of the Scripture, and at last it has a potential that makes it living and contemporary, able to incarnating itself evangelically in every people and culture.

For this super-temporal and super spatial characteristic to be able to expound, it is necessary that St. Jerome’s children in prayer keep looking for understanding what the Lord “shows.” In this endeavor it is indispensable the discernment that leads to distinguish the values of the Spirit from the concrete forms in which these values are

expressed and realized. Forms can be “set” and therefore, apt for a “certain time of a certain culture;” values, instead, have within themselves God’s energy that in many ways reaches all men of every time and place. For us too, as it was for Miani, this search is somewhat prophetic. Only in God’s experience – and in his light - St. Jerome’s spirituality can develop today its own potential and become, in a growing way, living legacy that the Congregation receives from God and guards by witnessing it and shedding light on it in the Church and the world.

A component confirms the previous statement regarding the exemplary richness of St. Jerome’s spirituality for the Church. It is a richness that takes the form of a peculiar tradition of spirituality and therefore, has the energy of translating itself in the time of our history in a school of spirituality. I refer to the # 8 of “Our Prayer”, where we appeal to the intercession of the Virgin Mary that her Son “may deign of granting us to be humble and meek of heart, to love his divine Majesty above everything, and our neighbor as ourselves, and that he may uproot our vices, increase our virtues, and give us his holy peace.”

In my opinion in this text are contained in an intentional order four orientations that can characterize a spiritual itinerary and represent a specific and original aspect of St. Jerome’s spirituality. The fact that these orientations are not treated in a theoretical way or at least mentioned together within a Letter, is not against the thesis that I am going to present, both because of the concrete characteristics of Jerome’s writings and because the Saint’s spirituality, as it appears from his letters, is clearly enlightened and characterized by these orientations.

The first orientation is contained in the expression “to be humble and meek of heart,” that denotes the same attitude of Jesus (cf. Mt 11:25-30), in whom it reaches its fulfillment the ideal of the “anawim.” It is then the man who opens up to the Lord with a faith that is trusting abandonment in him and unconditional openness to his word. If justification happens through faith (cf. Rom 3:21-25), could not it be faith itself, understood according to the rich peculiarity it has in the Scripture, the permanent foundation of the spiritual journey of man?

The expression “to love his divine Majesty above everything and our neighbor as ourselves” represents Jesus’ fundamental commandment (cf. Mk 12:28-32), that joins together, because of their “greatest” importance, the commandment of God’s love of Dt 6:4-5 with the one of the neighbor’s love of Lv 19:18. Those who by faith open with trust to the Lord live oriented to him with a total, exclusive, and permanent love. At the same time, love toward God, as it is revealed in the Scripture, develops as an intrinsic need of authenticity, the love for the neighbor. It follows that the faith itinerary is constantly concretized in love for God and neighbor (34). Couldn’t be this the second orientation of a spirituality that draws inspiration from the Gospel and the Scripture?

In the sentence “uproot our vices, increase our virtues” we meet the third orientation that we can call “ascetical.” The orientations’ hierarchy that places the ascetical moment after the one of the trusting faith and of love for God and neighbor reveals a wonderful tuning with the theological fundamental perspective of the Scripture. In all Scripture the observance of God’s will is understood as the man’s response to the salvation of the Lord who has reached him freely. The same perspective is attested by the NT where the parenetic moment of announcing is always seen as a consequence of the “kerygmatic”

moment that proclaims God's love revealed in the gift of the Son and, therefore, in the saving moment of the resurrection (35).

Placing itself in the fruitful furrow of the Word, "Our Prayer" understands the ascetical moment as a journey that the Christian takes when entrusts himself with confidence to the Lord and his saving work (faith), and opens his existence to the love for God and neighbor. If we keep in consideration the fact that the orientations are placed according to an intentional order, we find that two aspects become evident. They characterize the ascetical commitment and allow us to see the rich perspective in which "Our Prayer" is located. The ascetical commitment appears first of all as a fruit of God's work and not as a product of human effort. Second, any ascetical form is located in the space determined by the biblical coordinates of love for God and neighbor. Ascetics, in other words, takes the form of an expression in which the fundamental commandment that demands the total orientation of the being to God, is translated time and again in the daily existential reality of those who have offered themselves to Christ and are called "servants of the poor."

The fourth orientation is contained in the sentence "grant us his holy peace." The expression recalls the Pascal meeting with the Risen One of Jn 20:23-26. Therefore, it expresses the religious experience of the communion with the Father revealed by the Son, the experience of "koinonia" of the brothers that anticipates on earth the realization of the eternal communion in the Kingdom. It is the "double total union" (36) with God and all men in Christ's love. In this perspective our expression outlines the apex of the spiritual journey when faith and confidence in the Lord, love for God and neighbor, growth of the new man more and more freer from vices and richer of the virtues of the One who is risen, fully participate in the resurrection of Christ and, therefore, in the divine life.

The four orientations of the spiritual journey can be resumed in the words: faith, love, ascetics, peace. The exchange of peace that "Our Prayer" requires in this moment is full of meaning. In Jn 20, the gift of peace that the Risen One gives to the disciples constitutes the premise of their mission in the world as the community of the new covenant that is characterized by sin forgiveness and as such, it has the power welcome and re-generate in the Spirit those who believe in the Gospel. Similarly, in our text the "holy peace" that Christ gives is not locked in the narrow confines of a formalistic ritual, on the contrary, it represents the evangelical beginning of mission. This has its eloquent sign in the brothers who are "present" and who "exchange peace" as witnesses of their "koinonia" in Christ and as renewed awareness of the prophetic "diakonia" that makes them "servants of the poor."

In conclusion, we can affirm that St. Jerome's spirituality presents itself as a singular work of the Spirit in which God's marvelous works are manifested. Its greatness, its exemplary character, and its ability to express itself with the representative schemes of any culture, emerge not only from its contents, shaped in a harmonious way by God's Word, but also from the fact that it has its own itinerary, its own method. The goodness of this itinerary appears in its very beginning and in all its following stages because it is a journey that never folds in itself but constantly orients toward the one who is "beginning, means, and fulfillment of every good" (OP 13).

We hope that experts in the theology of spirituality may pretty soon develop these components and elaborate an articulate picture of the spiritual world of St. Jerome highlighting the original aspects and pointing out the possible tracks of actualization.

However, of a datum we are sure: in St. Jerome's spirituality we encounter the components of a great spiritual tradition. In it, our Congregation finds the source of its origin, the inspiration for its present, and the possibilities for its future. The task that today impinges on us –together with the religious families and numerous Christians who draw inspiration from the Saint- is to open up to the Spirit in order to understand this spirituality, to assimilate it, and spread it around. God's gifts cannot be kept hidden; they are destined to shine before all men.

NOTES

(1) This work owes a lot to the interest showed by the confreres for the themes of St. Jerome's spirituality which we have reported both on the occasions of retreats or conventions and with the articles published in *Somascha* and in the *Rivista della Congregazione dei Padri Somaschi*. This present work is a concrete sign of the attention and encouragement and observation of the confreres. A particular thanks to the confreres who have translated some of these contribution in Spanish and English.

(2) Besides the studies gathered in this volume, see also F. Beneo, "*Parole programmatiche di san Girolamo*", *Rivista della Congregazione dei padri Somaschi* 65/3(1991)163-181. For the Letters it exists also the series of "Quaderni di spititualità somasca", printed in S. Mauro Torinese since 1989. The aids, prepared by Fr. Geroldi show attention to the biblical perspective and contain an essential comment that emphasizes the spiritual richness of St. Jerome.

(3) This datum that we have emphasized with the synchronic analysis is confirmed by some external witnesses that could have been overlooked in a time when theology and spirituality did not have God's Word as an inspirational principle. I quote, as an example, an eloquent page of St. Jerome biography written by De Rossi. Referring to the period when Miani lived in Venice after having left the office at Castelnuovo, the Author writes: "He would spend the time left in reading the holy books, often dwelling with great attention and interest over several passages. From this it derived that, even though he did not study but Latin that he later abandoned because of war, he learnt at least so well the sacred histories and the most substantial sayings of the Holy Gospel that easily and readily they would come out of his mouth during conversation and he would confirm with them many of his devout thoughts when he would write family letters" (cf. G. Landini, *S. Girolamo Miani*, Roma 1947, 289, note 3). The reading of the Sacred Scriptures ("holy books") carried out "with great attention and interest"; the assimilation of the Word to the point that Minai would communicate in a spontaneous ("easily") and appropriate way ("readily"); the disposition to confirm his "thoughts" with the Bible: these components that make up the picture sketched by De Rossi fully correspond to the data that emerge from the scientific analysis of his letters. Moreover, the text assures us that Jerome knew Latin. This news allows us to better explain the presence of the Latin quotations in the letters of the Saint and in "Our Prayer."

(4) Hopefully, this aspect can be highlighted in a series of studies. They will surely offer a noticeable contribution for the maturation of the self-conscience of the Congregation. The analysis of the different texts of the Constitutions till the 1626 edition, allows to catch a glimpse of very encouraging results (e.i., the motif of the trust in “Monita” that directly relates with one of the central themes of Miani’s letters).

(5) Cf. pp.33-45

(6) Cf. above, p. 36

(7) In St. Jerome’s language, the paternal image is present in a sober manner and mirrors a deep assimilation of the biblical perspectives and categories regarding the divine fatherhood.

(8) After havening found in “Our Prayer” the inner connection between God’s fatherhood and royalty, we came across in the following thought of Ricoeur: “... first of all, it is necessary to admit that fatherhood was not the initial category of the Gospel; rather, the Gospel’s melodic core, as we see in Mark, is the coming of the kingdom, an eschatological notion par excellence. It happens here as it did in the OT: fatherhood comes from the covenant; more exactly, the coming kingdom, preached by the evangelical *kerygma*, is the heir of the new economy announced by the prophets. From the category of kingdom we need, therefore, to interpret the one of fatherhood” (cf. P. Ricoeur, “La paternità dal fantasma al simbolo”, in *Il conflitto delle interpretazioni*, Milano 1977, 504-505). This quotation, if on one hand it alludes to a perspective that has not yet received due attention from the biblical science of this century, on the other it allows us to perceive the depth and the solidity of St. Jerome’s concept of divine fatherhood.

(9) It is very enlightening at this point recalling Lk 18:9-14 present in the invocation: “O God, be propitious to me, a sinner.”

(10) The structural analysis of the texts in which occurs the motif of trust further confirms the vital importance of trust in the spiritual experience of Miani. See above, pp 36-38.

(11) The beauty of this sentence that contains a great richness appears in the stylistic antithesis between the adjective “all” and the expression “only he.” The totality and exclusivity of trust carry in itself, as a condition of its possibility, the request of monotheism in its totally vital and fully interpersonal dimension.

(12) The biblical connotation of the term “humble” is fundamental for properly understanding the locution “humble Congregation,” which marks the beginning of our Constitutions. They retake the expression “humilem hanc Congregationem” of the 1626 edition. The term obviously cannot be interpreted as a legitimizing of the Congregation’s limits as if it were a silent admission or a resigned proof of its “smallness” or “impotence.” On the contrary, it is directly correlated to the theme of trust and confidence in the Lord, theme that reveals the ideal of the “anawim” and that represents a characteristic component of St. Jerome’s spirituality. An eloquent proof of what I say is in the # 359 of the “Monita” that recites: “May support us the certainty that never will be confused the one who hope in the Lord (cf. OP 6); on the contrary, nothing makes brighter the omnipotence of the Word than the fact that he *makes omnipotent those who hope in him*” (“nil omnipotentiam Verbi clariorem reddere, quam quod *omnipotentes facit eos, qui spirant in eo*”). For this last sentence, underlined by us, cf. 2Lett 6: “he will make of you great things by exalting the humble.” Instead of being a term that locks in

the narrow space of moralism and devotionism, the adjective “humble”, according to its biblical connotation, expresses the value in which the “anawim” of every time find the source of their inner strength, faithful perseverance, and hope in a future characterized by the victory of God.

(13) The sentence of St. Jerome that put the guidance of the Holy Spirit in relation with the event of salvation in Jesus Christ contains a splendid theological and perennially current richness. For this it is enlightening what the metropolitan of Lattaquié, Ignazio Hazim, writes: “The Pascal event becomes ours through Him who is its author since the origins and in the fullness of time: the Holy Spirit... Without Him God is far away, Christ remains in the past, the Gospel is dead letter, the Church is a mere organization, authority a dominion, mission a propaganda, worship an evocation, and the Christian acting a slave morality. Instead, in the Spirit and in an undivided synergy, cosmos is uplifted and groans in the pangs of the kingdom birth, ... The risen Christ is here, the Gospel is life power, authority is a liberating service, mission is a Pentecost, liturgy is a memorial and anticipation, human acting is deified...” (Quotation taken from O. CLEMENT, *Dialogue avec le Patriarche Athéagoras*, Paris 1969, 496).

(14) A fruitful track of research has been proposed in the “instrumentum laboris” elaborated for the preparation of the Lombard Provincial Chapter of 1992. In the pp. 25-26 we find the following statement: “The expression that is present in the Constitutions of 1555 “**work the works of the Lord**” can in synthesis express the spirituality of our Founder and his disciples, as far as we give to the term a non reductive meaning, but one that is full and pregnant. The internal object (work of the Lord) qualifies the verb “to work” in a deeply religious and spiritual way. To work, however maintaining the dimension of concreteness of the human acting that is expressed in sensible gestures historically circumscribed, assumes the value of sign; its efficacy surpasses the limits of materiality, sensitivity, because the **main agent is the Lord**. Somascan spirituality translates itself in concrete gestures of closeness, solidarity, gratuity, liberation, salvation for man; however, it escapes from the danger of **praxism** because it is “**Christ who works**” and those who live the Somascan spirituality are humble mediations (instruments) who let themselves be guided by the Holy Spirit in the encounter with God Love... and with the loved neighbor... Better yet, the Somascan spirituality becomes vital synthesis between faith and love, between love for God and love for the neighbor, between contemplation and action.”

(15) Very eloquent, in this regard, is the alternative proposed by the Saint: “or you lack faith and will return to the things of the world, or you stay steadfast in faith” (2Lett 6).

(16) For our statement it is enlightening the tension between Rm 8:14-16 (we are children of God) and Rm 8:23 (we wait for the condition of children). Such a tension is understood in the light of Rm 8:28-32; 2Cor 3:18; Phil 3:20-21: our being children is realized according to God’s design; therefore, it develops in a growing way, because of our progressive transformation in the icon of the Son, and reaches its fulfillment with the “redemption of our body.”

(17) For a general vision of the theme of resurrection in the contemporary theology cf. G. O’Collins, *Gesù risorto*. A biblical, historical, and theological research on Christ’s resurrection, Brescia 1989.

(18) For this theme, see pp. 17-18; 39-40; 46-52; 67-68; 83-85.

(19) The presence of the Pascal dimension in St. Jerome's spirituality has been demonstrated and studied in 1987 (cf. above pp. 75-89). Later on, the topic has been deepened by F. Beneo, *Parole programmatiche di san Girolamo*, (art, quoted at the note 2), 173-174.

(20) For the demonstration of the affirmations here recalled and for the study of the expression "staying with Christ" see pp 61-75.

(21) It is meaningful that in Rm 15:14 the "brotherly correction" is listed, together with "goodness" and "knowledge" among the characteristics of a community that builds up according to the Gospel.

(22) For this list cf. Col 3:12-15. It is interesting to point out that in the 6Lett (paragraph 4b) Jerome presents some expressions that are the same of or similar to the quoted text of the letter to the Colossians.

(23) Cf. pp. 84-86

(24) For the exam of the passages that witness in Jerome a spirituality characterized by the resurrection, cf. pp. 76-81.

(25) The ecclesial dimension besides the original at a theological level is exemplary even for an existential and pastoral profile. The expression of Molfetta "and we earn the universal reform of the Church, of which he had a great thirst" (cf. G. Landini, *S. Girolamo Miani*, Roma 1947, 490) allows us to perceive an inspirational principle which is determinant in the choices and activities of the Saint.

(26) Cf. T. Federici, "Spiritualità biblica della "nostra orazione", 170.

(27) We do not know the year in which "Our Prayer" was composed. Any way, 2Lett, written on July 22, 1535, presupposes its existence explicitly (cf. 2Lett 3).

(28) In this context it is legitimate to note that St. Jerome's spirituality, developing at the light of the scriptural fundamental themes, contains values such as the love for the Lord, his tenderness, trust, perseverance in trials, love for the neighbor, and service to the poor, which can be easily found even in other religions of humanity. In other words, St. Jerome's spirituality, understood in its deep dimension, offers precious orientations for an inter-religious dialogue. On the meaning of the inter-religious dialogue and its importance in the life of the Church, cf. J. Dupuis, *Gesù Cristo incontro alle religioni*, Assisi 1991, 293-353.

(29) The interpretation of this sentence as a recalling of Jn 11:50 is objectively unfounded given that the fourth Gospel speaks of "dying" and "perishing", while Jerome speaks of "suffering" and being "troubled."

(30) They are connected to the wisdom tradition not only the expressions such as "not to be confused," "founded on the solid rock," but also the understanding of sin with the image of dissipating "every our spiritual and temporal good."

(31) We need to pinpoint that the teaching was not at all excluded, as we can deduct from the expression "it was *certified* by me and others" (2Lett 8). This sentence, if it is read in its context, allows to understand "how much deep and living was the formation of the members of the Company and how much spiritual effectiveness could have in them the words of Jerome who *would comfort* 'in the love of Christ and in the observance of the Christian rule'" (cf. above, p. 42-43).

(32) It belongs to the wisdom motif the need of an authentic formation itinerary too. Reading the letters and the historical witnesses referring to this topic, one can easily observe the central value that Jerome gives to this idea. Formation, for Miani, has its

foundation in God; it must develop in tenderness, meekness and patience, never separated from necessary firmness; it privileges the initiatives of preventive nature and presupposes a, interpersonal relationship characterized by life witnesses (“when I was with you I showed with words and deeds”, cf. 2Lett 2).

(33) It is surprising the tuning between the view of prayer, as it emerges from the letters, and the idea that we can glimpse at in “Our Prayer,” where we encounter a prayer intense for its contents and rich in spirituality. St. Jerome’s is, in act, a prayer “deeply tuned in with the Church’s liturgy, vitally permeated by the Word of God; it is a prayer that opens up to God’s experience, to his enlightenment; it is a prayer that pervades life and transforms it, making it offered and ‘diakonia’; it is a prayer that unites heaven and earth, that strengthens the bonds of brotherhood, communion, and encounter with all men...; it is a prayer that demands trust in the Lord, that invokes the intercession of angels and saints; at last, it is a prayer in which the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary occupies a special place...” Cf. p. 102.

(34) The expression “love for the neighbor” today assumes different values. We mention here those which are the most common at a theological-pastoral level in showing the vitality and fruitfulness of St. Jerome’s spirituality:

1. Ecclesial Love: Brotherly love is incarnated in the Church, develops the “koinonia” and does not give up “the commitment for the ecclesial reform through the prophetic denunciation..., the cooperation in carrying on the common project and especially the life witness” (S. DeFiores, “Itinerario spirituale,” in *Nuovo dizionario de spiritualità*, 805).
2. Ecumenical Love: Love reaches out to all “brothers in the Lord,” with a heart free from intolerant and controversial attitudes, and moved by the ardent thirst for the universal reform of the Church, reform that has as a its own goal the sanctity of the time of the Apostles.
3. “Inter-religious” Love: Love opens one’s heart to perceive the manifestations of the salvation of God in all humanity, especially in the spiritual values that men experience within their religions. These values are “seeds of the Word”, sign of the Wisdom that works “in every people and nation” (cf. Sir 24:6). Such a love, it seems, takes seriously the view of the “potential Church” of which “Our Prayer” speaks, opens one’s heart to the inter-religious dialogue and commits to join Gospel proclamation with the life prophetic witness.
4. Love working in history: Christian’s love “aims at changing the conditions of the oppressed and marginalized through structural reforms that promote common good with its values of equality, fraternity, social justice, freedom” (S. DeFiores, *quot. art.*, 805).

(35) See, for example, Col 3, where mortification of that part that belongs to earth (vv. 5-11) and the vital development of the “things above” (vv. 12-17) are presented as consequences of the fact that the baptized have “risen with Christ”(cf. v. 1).

(36) The expression “double total union” represents the formula with which P. Medaille underlines in a meaningful way the relation between love for God and love for men (cf. J.P. Medaille, “Lettera eucaristica,” in *Testi primitivi*, Torino 1984, 19-20).

