

IF THE COMPANY STAY WITH CHRIST (1)

In these years we see in the Church a growing interest for the Word of God. It becomes more and more theme of study and prayer, reflection and contemplation. This fact, undoubtedly, represents one of the most genuine fruits of renewal fostered by the Council Vatican II, and constitutes, in particular, a clear witness of the spiritual and pastoral fruitfulness of the “*Dei Verbum*,” the well known council document on divine revelation (2).

A similar religious listening of the Word of God has brought us, children of St. Jerome, to a consoling and surprising observation. By growing in our knowledge of the Scriptures, the letters of our Saint have begun to reveal a deeper richness, have allowed us to have a glimpse of a spirituality perennially exemplar because it is intimately characterized by the “wisdom” assimilation of the Word of God. Some studies have already pointed out the biblical dimension present in the letters of Miani and “*Our Prayer*,” and underscored the compelling need of further scientific research (3). They, in fact, not only will allow to grasp in an adequate way the spirituality of the Founder, but will also offer the possibility that the figure of St. Jerome manifests itself in the Church and the world in its genuine specificity and fruitful richness.

The present study is located in this context, and therefore, as a leg of a journey that aim at reaching a global and scientific knowledge of Miani’s spirituality. We would like to examine the expression “if the Company stay with Christ, we will obtain our goal, otherwise everything is lost.” (4)

As we know, the first letter, in which we encounter the sentence just quoted, has been written in a very crucial moment of the works of the saint. The reason why he went to Venice were as such that they would not allow a quick solution. On the other hand, other problems required his presence in Lombardy with urgency (5). In this critical situation, Jerome reminds himself and his own to the essential: “if the Company stay with Christ, we will obtain our goal, otherwise everything is lost”. This is the “conclusion” to which Jerome appeals, so that the undertaken work may not run the risk to fall in nothingness (“everything is lost”)!

This reference to the existential situation (*Sitz im Leben!*), where our expression has had its origin, is sufficient for understanding that it represented a central leitmotif of the experience of the saint and in the program sketched by him for his Company. By enlightening all the evangelical perspective of the appeal to “stay with Christ” we will be able to better understand the importance of a characteristic, or better, central value in the vision that Miani had of his own mission and his Company.

1. “STAY WITH CHRIST”: EVANGELICAL THEME

The expression “stay with Christ” appears as a typical formula of the NT tradition in order to indicate the “disciple of Jesus” (6).

This datum is found first of all in the Gospel of Mark, which pay special attention to the Twelve in the period of their life together with Jesus. In the intention of the evangelist, the experience of this communion constitutes the perennial model of every

disciple of the risen Lord. In this perspective, it is understandable the solemnity and importance of the text narrating the institution of the Twelve:

“Then Jesus went up a hill and called to himself the men he wanted.
They came to him,
and he chose twelve, whom he named apostles.
‘I have chosen you to be with me,’ he told them.
‘I will also send you out to preach,
and you will have authority to drive out demons’.” (Mk 3:13-15)

As is evident from the structure of the translation, the first goal of the calling of the Twelve is represented by the expression “to be with me.” The mission itself (to be sent to preach the good news and to witness it with works of “new life”) presupposes “staying with Christ,” living with him, in his presence, seeing his works and listening to his words. It follows that that in origins “staying with Christ,” like the verb “to follow,” had the concrete meaning of indicating the life the apostles led in the company of their Master. We need to point out, though, that the expression did not limit itself to mean a staying together in a mere material sense. Rather, it would connote a communion of life founded on the sequela of Jesus, and therefore, on a relationship of absolute love and dedication to his person (7). It is right this profound and vital meaning that spurred the evangelist Mark to prefer the syntagm, which interests us, with the intent of highlighting the condition in which the true disciple of the risen Jesus of every time finds himself (8).

In fact, the second evangelist again reports this expression in 5:18-19, in a context particularly enlightening. The possessed man of Gerasa, once he has obtained healing, asks Jesus that he will be allowed to “stay with him;” however, “he did not allowed him.” Here it is clear that to “stay with Jesus” is not a fruit of a personal decision or choice, but it is a distinctive gift from the Lord, it is the possibility opened by his free call (cfr “he called to himself the men he wanted”: Mk 3:14). In this perspective, we understand the emphasis Mark put on the gratuity and greatness of the Twelve: “You have been given the secret of the Kingdom of God” (Mk 4:11). In the call of Jesus to “stay with him” it is realized the “gift” of the father (to whom it alludes the theological passive “you have been given”), who reveals his Son (9).

The episode of Peter’s denials confirms that the expression “stay with Jesus” is technical in order to indicate the Twelve. “You too –says a servant of the High Priest– were with Jesus of Nazareth!” (Mk 14:67) The all context allows us to affirm that “staying with Christ” does not mean to live materially with him, but –and above all– to live a personal relationship of faith and fidelity, relationship thanks to which the presence of Jesus is welcomed, experienced and witnessed with one’s own perseverance until death. It is a relationship that can be founded only on the certainty that, in the risen Lord, the Father communicates the mystery of his kingdom and therefore bestows on those who believe his love, that is life of salvation. This experience, which from the moment of the resurrection constitutes the great gift of the Spirit given to all the believers, is expressed with unmatched terms by St. Paul: “For I am certain that nothing can separate us from his love: neither death nor life, neither angels nor other heavenly rulers or powers, neither the present nor the future, neither the world above nor the world below – there is nothing in

all creation that will ever be able to separate us from the love of God which is ours through Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rm 8:38-39).

The expression that indicates “staying with” Jesus is found also in Mt and Lk: “Anyone who is not with me is really against me; anyone who does not help me gather is really scattering” (Mt 12:30; Lk 11:23). Both the evangelists report here a saying that is found originally in the source Q, that belongs to the judeo-christian church. Therefore, it is an old witness, thanks to which we can say we are, in this case, at the presence of a language dating back to Jesus himself (10). We can see that even in this saying there are the themes of “staying with Jesus” and of the mission, to which the terms “gather” and “scatter” allude (11).

Similar connection is contained in a very meaningful text of John tradition: “And you too, will be my witnesses because you have been with me from the very beginning” (Jn 15:27). The conjunction “because” (*oti*) shows that “staying with Jesus” constitutes, for the disciple, the indispensable condition of the evangelical witness, which is the fruit of the Spirit, as far as it comes from the witness that the Spirit himself gives to Jesus in the hearts of the believer (cfr Jn 15:26).

John’s text, just quoted, has a special value because all the chapter is oriented towards the conclusive expression (“ you have been with me from the very beginning”) and enlightens it. If we take into consideration the three literary units in which Jn 15 can be divided (vv 1-8; 9-15; 16-27), we can grasp the rich implications that the expression “stay with Christ” assumes in this context. In fact, it comes to signify:

a. Remain in him

The sentence “remain in me as I in you” (Jn 15:4) presents a structure similar to the formula of covenant characterized by the reciprocal belonging to the Lord and to his people: “I am your God and you are my people” (12).

As we know, the formula of covenant has born in the Israel tradition in order to underline the gift of the communion of life that has the strongest and most suggestive expressions in the filial image (“I am your father, you are my son”) and the marriage image (“I am your groom, you are my bride”) (13). Jn 15:4 wants to affirm that this communion of life is fulfilled in the communion with the risen Jesus, in being as the branches united to him, who thanks to his resurrection, is the “true vine.” The expression “as I in you,” emphasizes that the remaining of Christ in us, through the Spirit, makes it possible that the people remain in him (14). To remain in Christ, consequently, means to participate, through faith, in his resurrection and to become every day his dwelling and therefore, the dwelling of the Father (cfr Jn 14:23). In this context, we have to note also that the welcoming of the Father and the Son is the condition why the disciple can bear fruit. Once again, we are the presence of the connection between personal union with Jesus and the fruits of evangelical witnessing, that is in other terms, of mission.

b. Remain in his love

“I love you just as the Father loves me; remain in my love” (Jn 15:9). All the paragraph of 15:9-15 represents a comment to our verse. Jesus’ love has its source and model in his Father’s love (“I love you just as the Father loves me”). To remain in Jesus’

love means, therefore, to open up to the same love of the Father, who “loved the world so much that he gave his only Son” (Jn 3:16); it means to welcome the love of the Son, which is the *greatest love*, as far as Jesus has love his own who were in the world to the point of fulfilling the love of his Father (Jn 13:1). The fact itself of welcoming “the greatest love” leads the disciple to become, in union with the Son, epiphany of the Father’s love: “love one another, just *as* I love you” (Jn 15:12; cfr 13:34-35). In this perspective we can affirm that “staying with Christ” indicates the condition of the disciple who live the experience of the love of the Father and Son and becomes, through the strength of the Holy Spirit, fruitful witness of this love in the midst of the brothers and all the human beings.

c. Remain in the election

“I chose you from this world, and you do not belong to it” (Jn 15:19). The election of the disciples by Jesus is the source of the true exodus through which the believer does not belong anymore to this world (Jn 17:16), but he belongs to the world of the resurrection, therefore to the one who is “the resurrection and the life.” As a consequence, the being of the Christian is not dominated and shaped by the forces of evil and self-interest, which reach those who belong to this world, because he is animated and enlivened by the Spirit of the Risen One and his interior witness. The Spirit, who opens the heart of the believer to the faith of the Gospel (and therefore in the joyful announcement of the Father’s love which reveals itself in the Son’s resurrection), progressively introduces in the ineffable experience of fidelity and tenderness of the Father. “Staying with Jesus”, in the light of this literature, means to live according the Spirit who develops in the believer the power of the resurrection by guiding him in all revelation (cfr Jn 16:13), therefore in that vital experience of the love of the Father and Son that will reach its complete fulfillment in the kingdom of heavens (cfr Jn 17:24 and 1Ts 5:17).

These three aspects encountered in Jn 15 allow us to perceive by intuition the deep richness in which the fourth Gospel puts the expression “staying with Jesus,” technical expression in the NT tradition that points out the disciple of the risen Lord.

2. “STAYING WITH CHRIST” IN ST. JEROME

When St. Jerome in his letter of July 15, 1535, writes “if the Company stays with Christ, we will obtain our goal, otherwise everything is lost,” he uses the expression “staying with Christ” according to the rich significance we have examined above. Different are the reasons, which lead us to this statement.

First of all, the introductive part of the first letter is characterized by a particular wealth of biblical quotation and allusions. In a few lines, the Saint quotes Mt 9:38 (Pray to the owner of the harvest that he will send out workers”), Mt 10:22 (“whoever holds out to the end”), Lk 24:29 (“Stay with us; the day is almost over and is getting dark”) and, in a suggestive way (15), he alludes to the tradition of Ex 17:8-13 (“in prayer I lift my arms as far as I can”). It seems logical to think that also the expression “staying with Christ,” which constitutes the central statement of the introductive part, could recall (at least by allusion) the NT theme expressed with the formula “staying with Jesus.”

Another datum leads us in the same direction. It is the centrality of Christ in the Miani's spirituality. This theme requires that it be faced with appropriate scientific research. For now, we limit ourselves to recall the sentence of the third letter which is known to everybody because of its spiritual immediacy: "we must think that only God is good and that Christ works in those instruments who let themselves be guided by the Holy Spirit" (3 Lett 3). A careful reading of this sentence allows us to see how much the spirituality of St. Jerome was influenced by the Scriptures, and at the same time, to cast a light over the vital experience of the Saint in its most aware and high Trinitarian dimension. For Miani all the Christian life consists of letting oneself freely and responsibly be guided by the Holy Spirit (cfr Rm 8:14; Gal 5:16-25, above all the vv. 18.24.25). The baptized one is transformed by the Spirit in the glorious ikon of the risen Lord (cfr 2Cor 3:18) and a similar transfiguration in Christ supposes a real and personal union with him to the point that to every baptized we can apply the Pauline statement: "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20). For this reason, Christ becomes the subject of all the vital actions of the Christian, so that, without him, the Christian can do nothing (cfr Rm 8:10; Ep 3:17; Jn 15:5; 17:23).

Christ works, states St. Jerome echoing Jn 5:17 ("my Father always works and I too works"), and with his works he reveals and communicates the goodness of the Father to those who believe in him: "we must think that only God is good" (16).

The density of the biblical allusions present in this third letter, as well as the sublime Trinitarian experience, which has its climax in the goodness of the Father and its center in the works, that Christ accomplishes in those who allow themselves to be guided by the Holy Spirit, assures us that even the expression "staying with Christ" does not have only a devotional or sentimental meaning, but it assumes a deep and theological connotation, as we have it found in the NT formula "staying with Jesus."

In the NT "staying with Jesus" indicates a personal faith/love relationship with the one who God has constituted "Lord" and "Messiah" (Christ!), sole Savior, (font Q, retaken by Mt and Lk, but present also in Mk and Jn with slight variations). This communion is a gift of grace (cfr Mk 5:18-19 and the theme of election in Jn) and is the foundation of the mission. The reading of the writings of St. Jerome we have (Letters and "Our Prayer") easily reveals the presence of these elements in the faith experience of Miani, and this datum constitutes a further confirmation of the rich evangelical meaning the expression "staying with Christ" presents in the Saint's first letter.

If Jerome's expression alludes to a specific text, we believe that the most probable hypothesis be the one we can detect in the reminiscence of Jn 15:27. The solemn statement "if the Company stay with Christ, we will obtain our goal, otherwise everything is lost" reminds us of Jesus' words: "A branch cannot bear fruit by itself; it can do so only if it remains in the vine... for you can do nothing without me... If you remain in me... you will ask for anything you wish, and you shall have it" (Jn 15: 4.5.7). Lastly, Jn 15, which elaborates the proto-Christian theme of "staying with Jesus," represents the text that better illuminates Jerome's expression "staying with Christ." Also the theme of mission, that the Christian realizes as far as he welcomes the Spirit that the Risen One sends from the Father (cfr Jn 15:26-27; 20:21-22), constitutes a farther confirmation of our statement, given the fact that in the third Letter of the saint we find a thought similar under the structural profile (cfr 3Lett 3). (17)

A last observation is still necessary to underline the surprising “wisdom” assimilation of the Word of God by St. Jerome. All the NT tradition, as we have seen it, supposes that “staying with Jesus” is not fruit of human choice, but is the gift of the Lord himself who calls. In this perspective it is interesting to observe how Miani, after having maintained that everything depends on “staying with Christ,” he draws from his “conclusion” a consequence at first glance paradoxical: “Therefore, pray the Pilgrim Christ by saying: Stay with us, Lord, for evening draws near” (1 Lett 5).

Bringing together this invocation of the Emmaus disciples with what we have previously stated, produces a message that not only strikes for its intense luminosity, but also it fascinates for its extraordinary simplicity with which Jerome brings together different biblical traditions so that they can enlighten reciprocally and develop their characteristics (and therefore without strain) in harmony with the Word of God. If “staying with Christ” is the only way of salvation for the Company, Jerome concludes we need to ask the Lord to “stay with us.” This is the same than to say that “staying with Christ” is impossible if the Lord does not remain with us. In other words, the syntagm “staying with Christ”, is understood by Miani in deep tune with the theological perspective of the NT, and just for this, it shapes itself as a divine gift man can only obtain by trustfully asking with prayer. In the first letter, it is, over all, St. Jerome’s prayer, who as a new Moses, lifts his arms in prayer. However, it is also the prayer to which the saint calls all his Company, because every time in its life “evening draws near” it may anew experiment the joy of “staying with Christ” in the faithfulness to its own vocation and mission.

3. EXISTENTIAL PERSPECTIVES

The Congregation of the Somascan Religious and those who draw inspiration from St. Jerome find in the theme “staying with Christ” an evangelical trait that has characterized Miani’s spirituality and constitutes the essential aspect of our condition of disciples of the Lord, according to the vocation with which we have been called by God.

This result, we have reached with the present study, allows us to see Jerome’s spirituality in its evangelical richness and, therefore, in its always alive and eloquent exemplarity.

We can still add that the expression “staying with Christ” in the first letter of the saint, is located in a vocational context. For St. Jerome the dynamic perseverance faithful to vocation does not depend on external circumstances (people, happenings, structures, etc.), but solely on our “staying with Christ” and consequently on our prayer of supplication (true biblical epiclesis): “Stay with us, Lord.”

This perseverance, together with the prayer to the Father of the harvest, opens the future of the Company to an horizon of apostolic vitality and fruitfulness. “Staying with Christ”, indispensable condition to be faithful to the vocation received, seems to be also the great way through which the Lord will enrich Miani’s family with new vocations.

It would be interesting to read the writing of Miani in order to know how he lived and prospected the fundamental demand of “staying with Christ” in an existential way. It is a theme that requires an appropriate scientific research. Any way, it seems possible that we can state that for St. Jerome “staying with Christ” expresses itself in love for him, that becomes energy of charity (1 Lett 16); in faith in him, as a source of the works God

accomplishes through us (2 Lett 3ss); in the interior opening to the Spirit, who makes us instruments of the Lord and epiphany of the goodness of the Father (3 Lett 3); in the offering of oneself to Christ, in a constant journey of conversion to the Lord (6 Lett 4ss).

Even these expressions, with which Miani outlines the existential condition of those who “stay with Christ”, present themselves with strength and richness which derive from the NT, or better from all Scriptures. For this a conclusion is imperative. “Staying with Christ” will be fulfilled in us, in accordance with the design of God, as far as we open up ourselves, as St. Jerome did, to the Word, by assimilating it in so vital a way that it really (and not ideologically) becomes “word of life” and “light in our journey.”

NOTES

1. The present work re-elaborates the article published in *Rivista della Congregazione dei Padri Somaschi* 60/1(1986)61-69.
2. In order to get the innovative meaning of “Dei Verbum” it is always recommended the work of L. ALONSO-SOCKEL, *Il dinamismo della tradizione*, Brescia 1970.
3. The studies to which we refer to were published in *Somascha* in 1976 and 1977 and they are retaken and updated in the present volume. Important for the knowledge of our spirituality and for further investigations of it, it has been the conference held by T. Federici in 1978, reported also here.
4. The texts of St. Jerome’s writings are quoted according to the numeration presented in the Appendix of the *Costituzioni e Regole dei Chierici Regolari Somaschi*, Rome 1985.
5. Cfr C. PELLEGRINI, “San Girolamo Emiliani, I Somaschi e la cura degli orfani nel sec. XVI”, in P. BRAIDO, *Esperienze di pedagogia cristiana nella storia*, II, Roma 1981, 49. In this page, the quoted author writes: “While the his staying in Venice is more and more necessary, in the institutions of Lombardy there were various problems: the institutions were established in a hurry, but never solidified; the people were sincerely dedicated, but they needed support. The presence of Miani always had smoothed the problems, but now somebody could not find his absence justified and there was a certain uneasiness. Those were for the saint days of anguish.”
6. The Greek formula is constituted by the verb “eimi” and the preposition “meta.” For the different meanings that the verb “eimi” has in the NT, when it does not have the function of connection, cfr F. ZORELL, *lexicon Graecum Novi Testamenti*, Parigi 1961, to the item.
7. Cfr I. RADERMAKERS, *Il Vangelo di Gesu’ secondo Marco*, Bologna 1975, 143-144.
8. We refer to E. SCHWEIZER, *Il vangelo secondo marco* (Nuovo Testamento 1), Brescia 1971. The author was able to show in the structure of the Gospel itself the importance that has the theme of faith. See above all the comment to 8. 14-21.22-26 and to 10:35-45.46-52.
9. Mk 4:11 presents under the profile of tradition, a connection with Mt 11:25-27, where it is reported an old liturgical tradition. Thanks to it, it is still possible to perceive in the “eulogia” of the Judeo-Christian Church the experience of the revelation

of the Son and Father. From this old tradition it derives also the fragment of the hymn quoted in 1 Cor 2:9.

10. For reasons of brevity and clarity in this article we use the expression “staying with Christ.” In reality, in the NT we find the formulae “staying with me” (font Q and Jn) and “staying with him” (Mk). Only once it appears the expression “staying with Jesus of Nazareth” (Mk 14:67). The expression “staying with me” can be traced back to Jesus himself; “Staying with him”, in our opinion, is not due solely to narrative requirements, but especially to a need of theological nature: “He” is the risen Lord who from generation to generation makes operating his election and call. For a global and updated view of the problems the various Christian communities of the NT had to face and overcome, it can be useful the work of M. HENGEL *La storiografia protocristiana*, Brescia 1985.

11. For this interpretation, cfr L. SABOURIN, *Il Vangelo di matteo*, II, Marino 1977, 647.

12. In order to show the importance this formula has acquired in the OT