

PRAYER IN THE LETTERS OF ST. JEROME MIANI (1)

The research done over the letters of St. Jerome (2), has shown a language and a thought characterized by a vital assimilation of the Word of God. Miani's spirituality presents a suggestive tuning with the Sacred Scriptures. Since spiritual life finds in prayer the highest place of its expression and awareness, we think necessary to examine the letters of St. Jerome in order to verify whether it is possible to find in them the meaning and value that prayer took in his life and thought.

That this research is necessary it is clear from the fact that Miani has been a man of intense prayer. The witness for the trials of beatification (3) assures us that all who had known him personally were struck by his "much prayer." Jerome's understanding of prayer, in the measure it can still be reached and examined, will offer with no doubt dynamic and vital perspectives either in order to deepen the knowledge of Miani's spirituality, or in order to develop, in an authentic and mature way, that "return to the sources" that leads the Congregation to rediscover the hidden treasure of its spirituality and to prophetically explicit the awareness of its identity.

In the following pages we will examine three texts, which for their richness will allow us to outline the vision of prayer that St. Jerome has developed in his faith nourished with the Word of God (4).

1. THE GOODNESS OF GOD AS SOURCE OF PRAYER

The first meaningful text is constituted by the introductory part of the letter addressed in June 1536 to Ludovico Viscardi (5). In it, Miani, after having recalled the need to bear with the neighbor (6), to understand, and to pray for him (10,5-11,1), suggests to illuminate with Christian kindness and meekness the brother who has erred.

In this context, Jerome makes explicit and deepens the span of his exhortation with the following statement: "Pray that the Lord may make you worthy, with your patience and gentle talking, to give him such words that he will be enlightens about his error on the spot" (11,3-5). It follows a brief parenthesis, where the Saint, in support of his statement, invites Viscardi to understand the "error" of the brother, by putting himself in the perspective of faith. The error – states Miani – is allowed by God so that he who is responsible of his brothers, may learn to be patient and know human fragility, and, in his turn, he who committed wrongdoing, may be enlightened, so that everything may turn in a joyful experience of the saving glory of the heavenly Father. After the parenthesis over the meaning of the error allowed by God, Jerome returns to the thought already expressed in the sentence quoted above and develops it in a negative form (11,10-16), by inviting not to behave in a contrary way, that is by lacking in patience and trust in the exercise of one's role inside the community: "Be careful not to do the opposite when one of these cases occur, that is to murmur, speak ill, become angry, be impatient, say: "I am not a saint; they are not things one can bear; these are not men of self-control," or similar things; and then to pass your responsibility to others by saying: "It would be better that that fellow would talk to him, or write to him or warn him, because he would do it better than I; he will not believe me; I am not able to do this, etc."

Jerome's intervention arrives now to the point where the saint wanted to since the beginning. In fact, Miani, by presenting the conclusion of his argument, puts before the

luminous and implicating horizon of the goodness of God, which makes of the believers instruments of salvation, in whom Christ himself works through his Spirit: “We must think that God alone is good and that Christ works in those instruments who let themselves be guided by the Holy Spirit” (11,16-18).

These observations, which spring out from the reading of the text, allow us to detect the intimate connection that bears all the first part of the third letter. The supporting lines of his message are set in a way to form a chiasmic structure, as it can be seen in the following outline:

- a. *“Pray that the Lord*
- b. *may make you worthy*
- c. *to give him such words that he may be enlightened”*
- a’ *“We must think that God alone is good*
- b’ *and that Christ works*
- c’ *in those instruments who let themselves be guided by the Holy Spirit”*

This structure, that supports all the part just examined, is extraordinarily eloquent. In particular, it makes it possible to individualize some aspects which reveal themselves to be fundamental for the same understanding of the prayer Miani has developed in the existential itinerary of his faith and mission.

The first datum is the deep and interior connection between prayer and life. Prayer, in Jerome, does not present itself as a devotional moment, neither it is perceived as a flight from the concrete needs of the daily routine. On the contrary, it takes the shape as source of life, means that makes one stronger in faith, persevering in patience and instruments in whom Christ accomplish his work of salvation for the good of all the brothers.

We do not need to insist that such a connection between prayer and life reflects a deep tune with the biblical vision of prayer. In all the Scripture, prayer presents itself as experience of what the one who prays (Israel, Church, person) is because of the grace of the Lord, and in the same time, it takes the shape of waiting of what one can become because of the working power of the faithful and merciful love of God (7). This tune confirms the personal assimilation of the Scripture that Jerome has developed progressively, day by day in living and understanding the contents of the spiritual life with the light and richness of the Word of God.

As far as it is intimately connected with life (“pray that the Lord may make you worthy”), prayer is constant experience of the guide of the Holy Spirit. We meet here the N.T. perspective of the Holy Spirit as a perennial source of life and Christian prayer. The Spirit make all those who believe in the Gospel participant of Christ’s resurrection, and, as such, children of God, instruments in and through whom Christ continues his work in the time. In reality, the life of love, charity, patience, understanding, benignity is the sign that witnesses the fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:18-23) and therefore, it manifests his dynamic presence, through which the Baptized ones can live already since right now in the Easter of the Lord (Col 3:1-17). For St. Paul it is still the Spirit the One who prays in our hearts and makes possible and genuine our prayer as children to the Father (Rm 8:26-27).

As experience of the Spirit, prayer is at the same time experience of Christ, of his pascal work in us, work that makes us instruments of his salvation, love and forgiveness. In this perspective, prayer appears essentially connected with life. As Jesus, the only

begotten Son sent into the world, would experience in prayer his intimate union with his Father, contemplated in his infinite love for human beings, so the believer in his prayer renews and revives the experience of his being in Christ and as a consequence in the Father. In this way, he opens himself to the risen Lord who works in him by revealing to him the Father's love and by making him capable of witnessing this love with the daily gift of himself "for the life of the world."

According to the perspective that here opens up and that St. Jerome has drawn and assimilated from Scripture, prayer is the place where one perceives his mysterious identity of "instrument of Christ." In other words, to pray in order to be made worthy to help the brothers, means to pray in order to be instruments of Christ, in whom the Risen One accomplishes his works with the power of the Spirit.

In the light of what we have realized and by keeping present the outline that supports the text we have examined, it is possible to prospect the highest dimension of prayer in the experience of Miani. In reality, for St. Jerome "to pray to the Lord" is equivalent to "to think that God alone is good." In this conception of unfathomable depth it is manifested, even in the language, the existential dimension of Miani's faith. It is the faith that looks at the heart of the experience and message of all the Bible: the goodness of God. In order to understand the richness of this perspective typically biblical (8), it is useful to keep in mind Psalm 100:5: "The Lord is good; his love (*hesed*) is eternal and his faithfulness lasts forever."

The goodness of the Lord characterizes the mystery of his *hesed* and his faithfulness. The term *hesed*, extraordinarily rich at a semantic level, indicates God's *faithfulness* to his promises of salvation made to the patriarchs and continually renewed to his people. God's faithfulness to his "family" is but the permanent expression of his *love*: love that is at the origin of all his interventions in the history of man and is therefore the true source of exodus and covenant. The term *hesed* indicates this faithful love with which God encompasses, transforms, guide and lead man to his intimacy, in a life of authentic brotherhood. The Lord's love, according to the constant witness of the Scripture, preserves itself faithful even when man, unfaithful, fails the gifts of his God. It is love that always and truly "for us is strong" (Ps 117:2), becoming in this way *mercy*: mercy that opens the consolation of forgiveness, the experience of tenderness, and the joy of reconciliation. Faithfulness, love, mercy are the three fundamental values which concur in construing the semantic richness of the term *hesed*. They open for us the way to grasp, according to the light of the Bible, the message of the "goodness" of God (9) that stands in a central place in the spirituality, and therefore, in the prayer of Miani.

To pray to the Lord, therefore, means for St. Jerome to think that only He "is good," is living by continually recalling his marvels of salvation, in which the merciful and faithful love of God reveals and communicates itself (10), is going from these benefits of God to his Author in order to contemplate, taste and praise unceasingly the mystery of his love, which has been given through the Holy Spirit in Christ Jesus (cfr Rm 5:5). In this perspective of the Scripture and of the NT, as Miani has experienced, prayer is essentially experience of the love of God and from this love it draws its origin, its dynamism, and its effectiveness.

2. PRAYER AND CHRIST'S PRESENCE

The second text we need to examine is constituted by the following sentences: "If the Company stays with Christ we will reach our goal, otherwise everything is lost... Therefore, pray to the Pilgrim Christ by saying: mane nobiscum Domine, quia vesperascit" (11). The two sentences are separated by a brief which does not cut into the mutual explicit connection, underscored with much clarity by the conjunction "therefore."

From the tenor of these expressions, taken in their context, it is clear that in the thought of Miani all the existence of the Company is tied in with its "staying with Christ" (12). It is the biblical theme of the personal and real union with the Lord Jesus, theme that is developed in the fourth Gospel. "Staying with Christ" (Jn 15:27), as well as "remaining in Christ" (cfr Jn 15:4), is equivalent to living in the experience of the love of the Father who makes all men share in the resurrection of his Son, and , therefore, of the trinitarian communion. (cfr 1Jn 1:1-3). It is equivalent to translating in the daily routine the mystery of our transfiguration in the glorious ikon of the Lord through the work of the Holy Spirit (cfr 2Cor 3:18). Last, it is equivalent to following the Christ by prolonging in the time the saving work He himself has accomplished, once and for all, with his death and resurrection.

This is the conclusion – Miani states: to stay with Christ! This is, therefore, the horizon I which the Company is called to live every day, this is its ideal, its goal! In the light of the message presented here, it is possible to pinpoint the semantic virtualities disclosed by the term "therefore," term that establishes a close logical relationship between the second sentence and the first one. If "staying with Christ" constitutes the life itself of the Company, for Miani there is a coherent and important consequence: to pray so that the risen Lord, the "Pilgrim" Christ, may remain in the midst of his own.

Also here we meet the same perspective that stands at the center of the faith witness by the NT and that has its heart in the stories of the apparitions of the risen one.. In these stories it is easy to pinpoint, through the narrative elements, a scheme that reflects a deep theological understanding. Some women go to seek Jesus who had been laid in the tomb; some disciples do the same too. However, the encounter with Christ happens only when the Risen one takes the initiative of looking for his own and to find them. Staying with Christ, in other words, does not depend on the will or ability of man. In reality, such a perspective would be but an un-fulfillable utopia, if Christ himself, first, would not come to put his dwelling among his disciples, to love them, to make them his own, and therefore, to give them the possibility to remain in his love (Jn 15:9-10).

In this perspective, in the witness of Miani, prayer appears as a constant experience of Christ's Easter and therefore, of the staying of the Rise one in the heart of the believers, in the Church, in the Company. In this perspective, one can state that prayer is the experience of the Lord who transforms the night of darkness into the night of Easter, is growing expectation of the Risen One who more and more transfigures existence until the fullness of our resurrection (cfr Phil 3:20-21), when "we will be always with the Lord " (1Th 4:17). This pneumatic presence of the Risen One, with his Word and Sacraments (13), constitutes the condition of the possibility that the disciples will stay with Him, remain in his love and be constituted instruments in which Christ himself works.

Even here it is evident the intimate connection between prayer and life, which we have already encountered in the previous text. Prayer is experience of the Lord who remains with us and, at the same time, is confident invocation so that He remain with us in all the moments of life, above all in those threatened by the darkness which jeopardizes our staying in the faith and vocation.

3. PRAYER AS BAPTISMAL EXPERIENCE

The last text we will examine is contained in the sixth letter: “And to be frequent in prayer before the Crucified and to pray to Him that He may open the eyes of their blindness, ask for mercy, that is, they may be made worthy of penance in this world as a pledge of eternal mercy” (14).

The expression “to pray to Him that He may open the eyes of their blindness” constitutes a hint to the Luke’s text of the blind man in Jericho (Lk 18:35-43), which Jerome referred to also in his third letter (11,17). To acquire the light of the eyes had become in the Christian community of the NT a symbolic sentence to indicate the light of faith, therefore that light that the Father bestows, now, to the men through His Risen Son and that has its fulfillment in Baptism. For this reason, as we know, the Baptism in the NT had also received the name “enlightenment” (cfr 2Cor 4:4-6; we can also see the rich catechesis of Jn 9).

It is interesting to observe that the Luke’s text of Jericho’s blind man concludes itself in a manner extremely charged of meaning: “Sir, - he answered - I want to see again. Jesus said to him, Then see! Your faith has made you well. At once he was able to see, and he followed Jesus, giving thanks to God. When the crowd saw it, they all praised God” (Lk 18: 41-43). The gift of sight is connected with the gift of faith, develops the following of Jesus and climaxes in the praise to God. In these few verses, we can find, in a synthesized and eloquent way, all the Christian experience of the baptized.

These elements allow us to get a third perspective in Jerome’s conception of prayer. Essentially, it is the baptismal experience that God, in his great love, renews and rekindles in the heart of the praying faithful. The faults of a Christian darken the light received in Baptism, weaken faith, make uncertain hope, chill the fire of love and lead away from the praise to God. On the contrary, in prayer the Risen-Crucified opens the eyes of our blindness so that in his light we may contemplate and experience the love of God working in us. In prayer, therefore, faith is enkindled, love is strengthened (love that expresses itself in “works of penance,” that is, in the works that spring from the conversion to the Lord) and the mercy of God is praised, since we have already down here, in hope, the first-fruit of the future fulfillment.

In this perspective we can understand the full meaning of the expression “to be frequent in prayer before the Crucified:” the Lord Jesus is present and works in us because through the paschal power of His Spirit makes us share of his redemptive death, bestows on us the Spirit he has given to “his own” with his death and resurrection. In point of fact, to be frequent in prayer before the Crucified means to pray to Christ “Pilgrim,” the Lord of glory, so that He may remain with us, work in us according to His Word, teach us to walk in the presence of God and make us instruments of his work of salvation (15).

Last, we see that even in this text it surfaces with clarity that connection between prayer and life we have already encountered in the two previous texts. For Jerome, prayer renews life, re-locating it in the light of faith, that light that, from Baptism, characterizes every Christian existence.

4. CONCLUSION

In order to evaluate the data surfaced in our analysis, it is useful to systematically recall the main forms with which prayer is expressed in the all Bible. They are:

- a) *Historical anamnesis*: The prayers, which belong to this form, develop the memory of God's graces, in the certainty that the Lord, faithful to his love, will renew them for the benefit of his people who invoke him.
- b) *Thanksgiving*: In recalling the wonders of God, in a joyful and uncontrollable, prayer of thanksgiving develops both from the individual and all the community.
- c) *Epiclesis*: This term indicates the invocation of the total presence of the Lord, the only One who guides his people and humanity to the ultimate fulfillment of exodus and covenant.
- d) *Intercession*: Through this form of prayer one remind to the Lord his love, so that he may renew it for all those in favor of whom the invocation is raised.
- e) *Praise*: It is the highest and most sublime expression of prayers, as in it man expresses his total and unconditional recognizing of the Lord as the "You" of his own "I," as the saving and redeeming God, as the one who has revealed through his interventions, his own love eternally faithful and merciful. A rabbinic saying maintains that in the future world sacrifices and holocausts will cease, while the sacrifice of praise will never end. In praise, as it follows from what has been mentioned, it appears the deepest value of prayer, value that somewhat is present in all its forms and consists of the proclamation of the Name of the Lord; in the confession of his merciful tenderness and his powerful salvation.

In fact, the soul that supports all these forms of prayer is the love of God, that love that Scriptures announces in its ineffable tenderness and unmatched power, and that the community of the Disciples of Jesus has experience of having received and of continuing to receive in a abundant and eternal way.

If we compare this biblical perspective of prayer with the reflections emerged in the study of the letters of St. Jerome, we will come up with an amazing observation. The Saint has internalized the Word of God to the point that his own prayer presents itself genuinely biblical either in its own reasons and contents or in its forms.

As we have seen it, prayer for Jerome is continuous experience of the love of God and his goodness, experience that raises in us the Magnificat of the praise of God (16).

Therefore, prayer is growing experience of the paschal salvation of God, which reaches us in Christ Jesus through the Spirit. It is the uninterrupted baptismal experience of the benefits and wonders of God: Christ remains in us and fulfills our own staying in Him, works in us and leads us with his Spirit. In prayer, therefore, the Risen One renews for us the baptismal enlightenment, freeing us from the darkness of incredulity in order to introduce us, through faith, in his sequela and in the glory of God.

A global reading of all the letters allows us to see also the living and rich presence of the epiclesis and intercession, the latter meditated and assimilated by Miani in a deep way, when at the hour of battle he presents himself as a new Moses who intercedes for his own (2,2-4).

We need, also, to note in the vision of St. Jerome, the continuous and strong link that connects prayer to life: his life and the life of his companions and his own children. At the origin of vision of prayer developed by St. Jerome there are the concrete experiences of his mission which had led him to sharing his existence with the poor (abandoned, orphans, victims of vice, sick,...). From these experiences, enlightened by faith and awareness of his self-offering to Christ, it develops a spirituality that underscores with special preference, the themes of goodness, tenderness, benignity, and mercy of God. As it is easy to see, they are all themes, which must reflect and incarnate themselves in the life of those who have themselves be called, by vocation, “servants of the poor of Christ” (17).

In the analysis of the texts, which are all very significant for understanding prayer in the spirituality experience of St. Jerome, we have use terms, which reflect the current sensitivity and terminology of the biblical and liturgical studies of today. For this reason, we feel we have to point out that in the use of these terms we have looked for the greatest sobriety, that is, we turned to them only when in the writings of the Saint clearly it was evident the same experience, today defined with a language more familiar to us. Away from thinking we have attributed to Miani thoughts or experience foreign to him, we have the awareness that we were not yet able to adequately express the richness and depth of his spiritual world.

NOTES

1. The article appeared the first time in *Somascha 2* (1977)21-29.
2. Cfr *Somascha 1*(1976)7-14, 50-63, 105-113.
3. Check “Acta et processus sanctitatis vitae et miraculorum ve. Patris Hieronymi Aemiliani,” (“Fonti per la Storia dei Somaschi,” n. 2: Processi di Como e Genova; n. 5:Processo di Pavia; n.6: Processo di Milano). We quote as a significant witness a passage of the deposition of Paolo da Seriate: “He was very devout; when he was at home, he will stay in prayer most of the day and night, and during the evening a lot; and after mifnight until dawn, he would stay in continual prayer, if he were not busy with some service in the house, as I have seen him” (Processo di Como, 7).
4. The letters of St. Jerome are quoted in the way pointed out at the note 2 of pag .Severla times in his *Letters*, Miani speaks about prayer: for ex, you could see the first letter, to Agostino Barili of July 5, 1535: 1, 6; 2,2ss; 2,8; 2,23ss; 2,27; 3,5ss; 3,14-23; 3,26s. The study of these texts could show us the sensitivity of St. Jerome toward all the needs and the most needy, sensitivity that for him would become woks of mercy and continual prayer. The three texts which will be examined in this work, however, are the most significant in order to comprehend the conception of the Saint about prayer, conception that had matured from his charismatic experience and vital assimilation of the Word of God.

5. *Le Lettre*, 10,1-11, 18.
6. Paul's typical theme: cfr Col 3:12-15; Rm 13:8-10.
7. Israel is saved, freed, continually loved: in his prayer it will remember the "magnalia Dei," in which the loving salvation of its God reaches it, it will thank and praise the Lord; Israel is continually in the condition of Exodus; in prayer, it will invoke the help of the Lord (epiclesis); Israel fails in the covenant's commitment: in prayer it will ask for the merciful forgiveness of its God (liturgy and penitential psalms); Israel is, by virtue of its covenant, a people of brothers, one family: in prayer it renews the experience and commitment of this brotherhood before the God of Exodus and Easter.
8. The sentence of Miani alludes to Mt 19:17 and parallels.
9. It is easy to understand, given the richness of this term, that it is used in the OT, to indicate the love manifested by God and experienced by the people in its Exodus and its Easter: cfr Ps 136 (recited by Jesus in his last supper, before leaving for the garden of olives) and Ps 118.
10. The first part of the second letter is an example extremely convincing of how this mentality, which sees man reached by God's salvation inside his history, coincides with the thought of Miani.
11. *Le Lettere*, 2,6-9.
12. About the meaning and importance of this expression in the spirituality of Miani, we refer to another study contained in this publication.
13. An allusion so explicit to the episode of the disciples of Emmaus allows us to maintain that also for Jerome the Word and Sacraments are fundamental signs of the presence of Christ in the midst of and with his own.
14. *Le Lettere*, 23, 24-27.
15. Cfr all the context of the sixth letter, where it is strongly marked the theme of the presence of God.
16. Refer to the allusion to *Magnificat* present in the second letter (6,1s).
17. This statement today appears confirmed by the studies done about "Our Prayer." Cfr in this volume the articles of Odasso and Federici.