Senses and spirit

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Words of Spirituality

by ENZO BIANCHI

The senses are not eliminated but ordered by faith, trained in prayer, grafted in Christ, and transfigured by the Holy Spirit

The integration of the sensory dimension in the spiritual experience seems problematic today. Does the expression ‘experience of God’ still hold meaning for us? Or must we resign ourselves to letting this experience be diluted to its purely intellectual dimension (speaking or writing about God), reduced to charitable and philanthropic activity (the ‘experience of God’ as altruism), or considered the exclusive privilege of the world of mysticism? We do draw near to God in faith, and not by sight, but we encounter God with our entire self, including our body and senses. Augustine proclaims this: “You called me and your cry pierced my deafness; you shone about me and your brightness dispelled my blindness; you spread your fragrance and I breathed in and now long for you; I tasted and now I hunger and thirst; you touched me and I burn for your peace ” (Confessions 10:27, 38). Augustine’s text echoes the doctrine of the ‘spiritual senses,’ first formulated by Origen in the third century. The Alexandrian monk writes, “Christ becomes the object of each of the soul’s senses. He calls himself the true ‘light’ that illluminates the eyes of the soul, the ‘Word’ we hear, the ‘bread’ of life we taste. Similarly, he is called ‘oil’ and ‘nard’ so that the soul can delight in the fragrance of the Logos, and he became the Word made flesh, tangible and accessible to the touch, so that our inner being can grasp the Word of life” (*Commentary on the Song of Songs* 2: 167,25.) In becoming human, God affirmed once and for all the body’s eminent spiritual dignity.

It is true that the traditional doctrine of the spiritual senses sometimes presupposes a fundamental opposition and division beween corporeal and spiritual senses, but in certain versions of the doctrine (in Bonaventure, for instance) we perceive the continuity between the two levels of senses. In any case, it is essential that we look beyond the anthropological perspectives, impracticable today, on which the earliest doctrinal formulations were based, and that we retrieve and reformulate the profound spiritual message they were intended to convey. Sensus fidei, insight into matters of faith, is grounded not in doctrinal knowledge but in life experience and in a ‘practical’ knowledge of God that allows us to arrive at an ‘understanding of divine things’ - in other words, discernment. We develop this spiritual discernment above all during the Eucharistic liturgy, where the mystery that is celebrated is the mystery of faith - yet the liturgy is also an experience that involves all of the believer’s senses. Those who participate listen to the Word of God proclaimed, see icons, candles, and the faces of those around them, taste the Eucharistic bread and wine, smell incense, and touch their neighbors as they exchange the sign of peace. The revelation of the Incarnation enters the human person through all of his or her senses, and in the sacramental economy, the celebration of this mystery involves all of the senses, but requires that they be refined and transfigured so that we can perceive all of reality ‘in Christ.’ The senses are not eliminated but ordered by faith, trained in prayer, grafted in Christ, and transfigured by the Holy Spirit. The baptized person thus reveals his or her identity as a new creature who truly “‘sees’ the Son of God, ‘hears’ and ‘listens to’ his word, ‘touches’ him and is nourished by him, ‘tastes’ him, and breathes life in the Holy Spirit.” This is how Biblical scholar Donatien Mollat describes the emergence of the spiritual senses in the fourth Gospel.

Let us not make the mistake of thinking that this is a ‘mystical’ experience inaccessible to most people. ‘Listening’ to the Word of God during prayerful reading of Scripture leads the believer to ‘see’ the face of Christ and ‘touch’ him in his nearness, ‘taste’ the consolation of the Spirit and shed tears - this is the extreme concreteness of the spiritual experience. The experience of faith is an experience of beauty, an encounter as real as it is indescribable, an awareness of a presence that is closer to us than our inmost self. And this experience invests the body and the senses. In the Christian East, a holy person is said to have a luminous face and a body that emanates fragrance - his corporeality has become an event of beauty and communion. We should take care, of course, not to confuse the psychological and the emotional with the spiritual, but the spiritual is present in the psychological and invests the body’s senses. The ‘spiritual senses,’ then, are not simply metaphors, but suggest the different aspects of communion with the Lord that can be revealed to the human mind: gentleness, strength, intimacy, passionate attachment, obedience, the intensity of a presence. This is *sobria ebrietas* (sober elation), the experience of love. When Augustine says that the eye sees ‘from the heart’ and that only love is capable of seeing, he suggests that the spiritual senses are the body’s senses permeated by the profound experience of the love of God, a love that purifies, orders and grants intelligence to human love. But who today is capable of offering an initiation in “the spiritual life of the body, in a world that, by confusing or separating body and spirit, has lost both and is gradually dying as a result of this loss?” (Cristina Campo)