Self-knowledge

Words of Spirituality
by ENZO BIANCHI
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One of the most characteristic aspects of Christian spirituality has always been its attention to the dimension of interiority. Holiness does not consist in a series of performances, however generous, holy or heroic - we encounter it on the level of being, and its objective is the conformity of the entire person to Christ. This means that in following Christ we are asked never to separate what is human from what is spiritual, and as we learn to know the Lord, we need to undertake the parallel journey that leads us toward self-knowledge. This is a theme that appears throughout the Christian tradition, which has not hesitated to adapt and rephrase in its own terms the inscription posted above the entrance of Apollo's temple at Delphi: "Know yourself." Origen and the Cappadocian fathers, Ambrose and Augustine, Gregory the Great, William of St. Thierry and Bernard, and the Carthusian and Victorine fathers have all explored in depth the meaning of self-knowledge, which is both an essential part of every person's journey toward becoming fully human ("The unexamined life is not worth living," Plato), and an essential process for every Christian who wants to begin his or her *sequela Christi* authentically (the self-denial asked for by Christ must be undertaken freely and out of love, and this is only possible if we know ourselves).

Without an inner life, without the effort of learning to know ourselves, Christian spiritual life is impossible, and so is prayer! There is a regrettable gulf today between the church and spiritual or inner life, and this is indicative of a crisis that is much more serious than any crisis evaluated in 'numerical-quantitative' terms, because it tells us that the church is neglecting its responsibility to initiate Christians both to life and to life according to the Spirit. In addition to this, we cannot fail to note that the attention given today to the 'I' and to the demands of subjectivity presents many ambiguities: cultural narcissism ("When wealth occupies a higher place than wisdom, when notoriety is more admired than dignity, and when success is more important than self-respect, this means that an entire culture overrates the image, and should be considered narcissistic," A. Lowen), spiritual pornography (the exhibition of the inner self, the disappearance of privacy that results in people's personal confessions or family problems being dished out to millions of television viewers), and the suppression of individuality by a technological culture that values workers who carry out pre-programmed tasks, which provokes the hypertrophy of the 'I' in other existential environments. These trends should, on the one hand, make us cautious when we speak about what it means to know ourselves; on the one hand, they tell us how urgent a discussion on self-knowledge has become. Our human freedom depends on knowing ourselves!

Those who know themselves are truly free because they are able to maintain well-balanced relationships with others and with reality, and because they are able to discover reasons to hope and trust in the future. The process of learning to know ourselves begins when we respond to a call - the call that makes itself heard in us, for example, when we feel the need to spend some time alone to think, reflect, and 'take a step back' from our daily life that threatens to numb us with its repetitiveness or overwhelm us with its frantic pace. We sense a call to make an exodus in the direction of our interiority, a journey towards the center of ourselves. We set out on this journey by asking ourselves questions (Who am I? Where am I coming from? Where am I going? What is the meaning of what I do? Who are other people for me?.....), and by reflecting, thinking, and working through our experiences. Only this process of interiorization allows us to become subjects in our own lives, instead of letting our life 'live itself.' Certainly, this journey into our interiority, this descent into our heart is laborious and painful. We usually refuse to undertake it for fear of what might emerge, what aspect of ourselves might come to light. Nietzsche spoke of the intense pain truth uses in revealing itself to a person.

Knowing ourselves requires attention and inner vigilance, which is the ability to concentrate and to listen to silence that, with the help of solitude, helps us rediscover what is essential. With time we discover the meaning of *habitare secum* - we learn to inhabit our inner life, and we allow our inner truth to reveal itself in us. At this point, self-knowledge also means recognizing our limitations and what is negative and incomplete in us - in other words, the aspects of ourselves we usually tend to repress so that we will not have to confront them. Our knowledge of our poverty, together with our knowledge of God, can then become an experience of God's grace, mercy, forgiveness, and love. What we previously knew because we had been told about it now becomes a personal experience. For this to happen, we need to remember never to separate these two aspects of the spiritual itinerary: knowing ourselves and knowing God. Knowing ourselves without knowing God leads to desperation, and knowing God without knowing ourselves produces arrogance.

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