



Notes on a spirituality for missionaries with migrants

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NOTES ON A SPIRITUALITY FOR MISSIONARIES WITH MIGRANTS

“Walk humbly with your God!”

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INTRODUCTION

The interest in spirituality has been rapidly increasing in the last few decades in both Christian and non-Christian circles. Is this just a passing fad, especially in view of the end of the second millennium, or a sign of a more profound human yearning? From a Christian perspective I personally read this renewed concern for spirituality as a movement of earnest believers toward the very sources of their faith and commitment. It is in the context of this quest for meaningful and relevant spiritualities for our times that this famous passage of the prophet Micah represents a powerful reminder of what Christian life should be: “*He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*” (6:8).¹ I chose the last part of this verse as the title of this paper precisely because it explains eloquently what is spirituality for me. Spirituality is to walk humbly with God and with God’s people. This special journey is not wandering without a goal, but according to Micah is a movement toward doing justice and loving kindness.

When I talk about God’s people I am referring particularly to a specific section of this people: the migrants. Why the migrants? For two basic reasons. First, they are with their untiring mobility the people who concretely express this idea of journey. Migrants are people who have walked, walk and will walk. I have seen many of them reach Tijuana with their feet and legs broken or badly bruised by their previous journeys. Yet, they are ready to continue on their way once they can walk again. Second, and most importantly, God’s grace has reached me through the migrants. The encounter with these people, with their stories of suffering and hard work, of hope and frustration, has transformed the charism of my religious congregation, the Scalabrinians,² from something abstract to a very real and challenging flesh and blood reality. A public statement issued in 1981 by the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches says: “One of the most dramatic phenomena of our times is that of the involuntary movement of millions of people forced to leave their homes and their countries.” (Hoffman 1989:53). This worldwide phenomenon represents without a doubt one of the “signs of the time,” a powerful channel of God’s revelation to us today.

¹ . The Bible version used for the quotations is the New Revised Standard Version.

² . Otherwise known as Missionaries of St. Charles. It is a Roman Catholic religious congregation founded in 1887 by the bishop of Piacenza (Italy) Giovanni Battista Scalabrini. The charism of this congregation is precisely the care of migrants and refugees.

While I was reflecting on a spirituality which is relevant to the phenomenon of human mobility, I came across a sentence of Bishop Giovanni Battista Scalabrini which I found in a mini-calendar prepared by one of my confreres in Mexico. This sentence reads: “No se llega a Dios con los zapatos limpios.” (God cannot be reached with clean shoes). I do not know if Scalabrini was inspired by the prophet Micah. What I know is that both inspire and challenge me to believe that spirituality is to humbly walk the path of our lives with God and with the migrants. People who start this journey will never reach the goal with clean shoes.

If spirituality is to walk humbly with God and God’s people, then we cannot expect an already determined and unalterable spirituality, but a spirituality, or, rather, spiritualities made of notes taken on the journey. It is some of these notes that I want to share in this article.

A CRITIQUE OF “TRADITIONAL” SPIRITUALITY

It is not my intention here to critique our Judaeo-Christian tradition as such. On the contrary, I neither reject tradition nor do I believe that tradition is something automatically old, outdated, and, as a consequence, useless. I firmly believe that to reject tradition would be to commit suicide because without tradition, without our past, without memory, without the experience of our fathers and mothers who have preceded us in the journey, we are nothing, we would be people without history and identity. Our Christian spiritual tradition is one of those wells from which we have to drink to nourish our lives and spiritualities today (Gutierrez 1984:5).³³

This wants to be instead a critique of the sacralization of tradition which transforms it into a static reality, unchangeable and valid for all times and contexts, something to be imitated without a question. On the contrary, tradition is a dynamic and developing reality. With our experiences and insights in the here and now we are giving our contribution to the Christian tradition which goes back to the religious experience of the people of Israel. So this is a critique of a concept of tradition which is detrimental to tradition itself because transforms this reality into something stagnant, irrelevant, and meaningless.

For centuries monastic/contemplative spirituality has been considered *the* spirituality par excellence of Christian tradition, the privileged path to human and Christian perfection. This spirituality detached from the particular context in which it was born has degenerated into an individualistic, elitist, and dualistic spirituality. Individualistic because it overemphasized individual perfection, and, as a consequence, spirituality was narrowed down to a relationship between “me and my God.” Elitist because this way of perfection was reserved exclusively to people who chose religious life. It is not a case that for centuries until now religious congregations and Institutes of

³ . Gutierrez takes this now famous image of “drinking from our own wells” from St. Bernard of Clairvaux.

consecrated life have been referred to also as Institutes of perfection. For lay people this way of life was not viable. The fact that they did not profess the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience excluded them automatically from this spiritual path. So spirituality produced two groups of Christians: a restricted circle of people who were enabled to follow the way of perfection through religious life, and the great majority of Christians who were too engrossed in worldly matters to reach the peaks of spiritual perfection. Aloysius Pieris refers to this spirituality as a “feudal spirituality” wherein the majority of Christians live on the crumbs falling from the tables of the contemplatives (Pieris 1988:8). The latter dedicated their energy to their interior life, to “contemplation,” to their spirit, trying to forget the needs of the flesh. In this way a false dualism was established between matter and spirit, this world and the heavenly world, which was supposed to be God’s world.⁴⁴ This dualism between body and spirit is gradually disappearing from our Christian theologies, but, unfortunately, it is still present and at work in much of our preaching and popular devotions.

The problem is that this spirituality of perfection has been imposed as a standard for all Christians, included active religious congregations. So it has not only caused the exclusion of the majority of Christians, but also the frustration of active religious who have realized the conflict between their active lifestyle and the imposed “contemplative” spirituality. I believe many members of the so called apostolic religious congregations have experienced this sense of frustration, but only a few have dared to question the “tradition.” I do not want to reiterate here the old dichotomy between action and contemplation. In fact one of the goals of a truly Christian spirituality is to bring these two essential dimensions of our life together in a creative and fruitful tension. Nor do I want to do away with our precious tradition of monastic and contemplative spiritualities. However, I firmly believe that contemplation cannot be superimposed to people from outside, from a different human and religious experience. Contemplation can only spring up from one’s human and religious experience, otherwise it would not be true to real life. In this sense I do not see how a contemplative spirituality which was born out of the experience of people who lead a stable life⁵⁵ can properly work for missionaries whose main characteristics are mobility, crossing boundaries, and living in different cultural contexts. There is no doubt that we can learn from other experiences, but it is crucial that at the center of a spirituality for missionaries there be a contemplation firmly rooted in their missionary experience.

Gustavo Gutierrez rightly observes: “At the root of every spirituality there is a particular experience that is had by concrete persons living at a particular time. The experience is both proper to them and yet communicable to others.” (Gutierrez 1984:37). If we do not realize the fundamental contextuality and embodiment of any spirituality we will always fall into the same traps: dualism, elitism, individualism and, eventually, irrelevance.

⁴ . For this first part of this section I was inspired by Gutierrez 1984:13-8; Rayan 1992:18-9.

⁵ . Monastic groups besides the vow of poverty, chastity and obedience which is proper to all religious congregations, have also a vow of stability.

Two presuppositions stand at the basis of a contextual and embodied spirituality: first of all, there is no spiritual life without human, historical life (Sobrino 1988:7). Secondly, human experience is one of the privileged *loci* of God's revelation (Downey 1994:12). Without this vital connection with human experience in its complexity, contextuality and always changing status (Gittins 1993a:25), spirituality is just an abstraction, "a pie in the sky." I believe Gutierrez captures wonderfully the meaning of this discussion when he says that when it comes to spirituality we basically "drink from our own well." We can drink water from any well, but we cannot remove a well from its context. If we want our spirituality to be relevant and meaningful to our mission it has to come first of all from our missionary identity and experiences.

A MIGRANT GOD WITH A MIGRANT PEOPLE

Any spirituality, any spiritual journey starts from a particular spiritual experience, starts with an encounter with God (Gutierrez 1984:35-53). God meets people not in a vacuum, but in their concrete life situations, in their life-journeys. Actually it is precisely the encounter with God which starts or changes people's journeys.

The Bible is filled with accounts of people encountering God which can illustrate this point. For instance, the passage of Abraham's call in Genesis 12:1-4 shows how the encounter with God changes completely the course of Abraham's life, and that of all of Israel's ancestors after him. A new journey begins with the promise of a great descendance and a promised land, and with a blessing which includes all the nations of the earth. Most importantly, this text reveals already a crucial dimension of God's identity which will remain constant throughout the Old and New Testament: "one thing makes this god different from the divinities found just about everywhere in those days. All those deities were linked to particular places - mountains, rivers, cities, regions - whereas the god that speaks to Abraham is a god who is not tied down to one spot. This god is a sojourner god, a pilgrim god." (Brother John of Taizé 1985:13).

This is not a static, sedentary God, but a migrant God who accompanies and guides people in their journeys. God is revealed to Abraham as a wayfarer (Genesis 18). It is the God who accompanies the ancestors in their journeys, continually renewing the promise made to Abraham to each one of them. It is the God that after freeing a group of slaves, a "mixed crowd" (Exodus 12:38) from the Egyptian oppression, makes of them a people, and guides them toward the promised land (Psalms 68:7-8; 77:19-20). It is precisely this pilgrim God who made a people out of the wandering, the slaves and the homeless that Israel will proclaim in its profession of faith, and celebrate in its liturgy (Deuteronomy 26:1-11).

This is a God who refuses to live in a temple, in a fixed space, because this is the God of the tent, the traveler God always ready to guide Israel in its journey (2Samuel 7:1-7). The period in which the people of Israel was walking toward the promised land, living in tents with their God is at the foundation of Israel's identity. It is for this reason that this God, through the prophets' scathing critique of the sinful comfortability of Israel's settled life, will call the people back to their tents (Hosea 12:10). Israel is called

to keep a “pilgrim heart” even when it leads a sedentary life (Brother John of Taizé 1985:53-4).

Very interestingly the theme of the migrant God, the God of the tent reappears in the New Testament revealing an often ignored continuity between the God of Israel and the God of Jesus of Nazareth. The author of the Fourth Gospel tells us in its famous prologue that Jesus, the Word become flesh, “pitched his tent” among us (John 1:14) in order to bring light and salvation to the whole humanity.⁶⁶ The Synoptic Gospels portray Jesus as always being on the road preaching the Good News to people in words and deeds. Jesus chose to be a stranger, to move at the margins of his society, and he did not only acquire the perspective of an outsider, but he became a marginalized himself (Gittins 1989:134-6). Jane Kopas reiterates this point: “Jesus both allowed the marginalized to speak their truth, and he also experienced that truth by being marginalized himself.” (Kopas 1993:117). This Jesus does not want honor, privilege and prestige, but he wants to be the least of all, the servant of the community (John 13:1-16; Luke 22:24-27). Jesus’ disciples are called to follow him in this lifestyle, to be “radical itinerants,” wayfarer messengers of the Good News of the Reign of God (Gittins 1994a:402-7).⁷⁷

If we look closely at God’s strategy in the Bible we discover that God does not only invite people to become strangers, migrants, but God chooses people who are already migrants to become God’s chosen ones. The migrants in the Bible are the object of God’s particular concern. In fact, we find especially in the Old Testament passages in which the God of Israel is presented as the chief protector of the widow, the orphan and the alien (Psalm 146:9), and the Israelites are called to care for the immigrants in their land remembering the times when they themselves were aliens in the land of Egypt (Exodus 22:20-21; Leviticus 19:33-34; Deuteronomy 10:18-19). But, most importantly, the migrants in the Bible are often the chosen ones, persons singled out by God to fulfill a special commission: Abraham and all of Israel’s ancestors, Moses (Exodus 2:22), the people of Israel in their journey toward the promised land, Jesus’ ancestors (Matthew 1:17)⁸⁸ and Jesus himself, the first Christian communities (1Peter 1:1; 2:11).⁹⁹

⁶ . The Greek verb in John 1:14 often translated as “lived” or “dwelt” is *eskenosen* (from *skene* which means tent). This verb literally means “he pitched tent”. Two of the authors whom I have consulted are particularly attentive to this important detail: Gittins 1994b:5, note 14 (I am referring here to the unpublished version of this article, the only one which was available to me at the time I wrote this paper); Gutierrez 1984:41.

⁷ . Here Gittins mentions the work of John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991) who emphasizes the “itinerant radicalism” of Jesus of Nazareth.

⁸ . I am referring here to the four women mentioned in the Matthean genealogy: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Uriah’s wife. Although there is ongoing debate in the field of Matthean scholarship regarding the meaning and function of the presence of these women in Matthew’s Gospel, there is no doubt that all of them are either Gentile or have Gentile connotations.

⁹ . See the stimulating hypothesis on the addresses of 1 Peter by J.H. Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless. A Social-Scientific criticism of I Peter, Its Situation and Strategy* (With New Introduction; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990). Here Elliott basically sustains that the Christians to whom this epistle was

It is important here to stress that election in the biblical context is a privilege which represents also a call to a special service. In one of the first formulations of God's election in Genesis 12:1-4 Abraham and his descendants are called to be a blessing not only to their own people, but also to all the peoples of the earth. This could be considered one of the true goals of election.

The picture given by the Bible raises some stimulating questions regarding the role of migrants and refugees today. Are they still the chosen ones as the migrants of old? If they are, what kind of service are they called to fulfill in today's world? In what way could they be a blessing to all peoples of the earth? What is the role of the missionaries in relation to this? I think these are very important questions for a spirituality for missionaries with migrants.

I believe that this biblical journey of ours is an essential part of our spirituality for missionaries. This image of the migrant God attested to by both Testaments is an essential element of our biblical tradition, and has to become an integral constituent of our spirituality for missionaries, and in particular missionaries with migrants.

The challenging presence of this migrant God raises a crucial question for our spirituality: "What does walking with God mean in concrete history and day-to-day life?" (Rayan 1992:19).

TO BE MIGRANTS WITH THE MIGRANTS

One of the fundamental presuppositions of contemporary theology and spirituality is that human experience is a privileged *locus* of God's revelation. If this is right, the next question is: where is God in the almost endless field of human experience? Our contention is that we can find the migrant God especially among the migrants and refugees, the powerless and the voiceless, and the marginalized of our contemporary world. Today, as in the past, God is found particularly at the edges of our societies, in our contemporary deserts crowded with people. I have experienced personally in the Philippines, in the slum areas of Manila, how crowded and full of life are these margins. This is particularly true, as I am witnessing right now, at the geographical borders of our societies. I was truly surprised when I heard that Tijuana had just 30,000 inhabitants thirty years ago. Now with more than two million people coming from all over Mexico, and Central America, it is most probably the largest border city in the world.

The crisis of today's spirituality is due to the fact that we do not look, or we do not want to look, for God in the right place. Pieris rightly observes in this regard: "The crisis today is not that there is not enough prayer - something that can never be empirically verified - but that the 'modern world', with which Vatican II wants us to

addressed are referred to as pilgrims and aliens not merely in a spiritual sense, as people going through their earthly pilgrimage toward their heavenly home. The people forming the Christian communities in Asia Minor were real strangers and aliens, and suffered the consequences of this particular social status in the context in which they lived.

dialogue, advocates a fictitious Christ, a Jesus minus his cross, or seeks him where he is not found, or eclipses the real (*unjust*) world where he hangs crucified, calling us to join his struggle.” (Pieris 1988:9).¹¹⁰⁰

God is living today especially among the poor. God has made a preferential option for the oppressed, and we realize that we are called to make God’s option. This means that we have to start the journey with God from our privileged places at the center of society to its margins. This migrant God invites people to move from their centers toward the edges, to something new and unexpected. Brother John of Taizé affirms: “The first act of the pilgrim God in his encounter with human beings is to offer them a life similar to his own, a life on the road, a wayfaring life.” (Brother John of Taizé 1985:15).

This option is what has been called by Latin American theologians “the option for the poor.” We have to stress that this is not merely a nice theological concept: in fact, the reality is that the concrete practice of this option by Christians has inspired and challenged theological reflection in Latin America, and other Third World countries, giving birth to numerous liberation theologies. Gutierrez constantly insists on the fact that practice, the commitment for and with the poor, and contemplation are prior to theology, and constitute the basis on which the latter is built (Gutierrez 1984:136). So the option for the poor is not simply an intellectual option, nor an option for poverty, but it is first of all an option for people who are commonly neglected, the non-persons, the “insignificant” (Gutierrez 1995:7). This option requires a conversion, and this conversion requires an option because conversion is to choose sides. There is no escape or excuse: our God calls us to choose the side of the people living at the forgotten edges of our society. Archbishop Oscar Romero in a speech that he delivered at Louvain in 1980 expresses wonderfully the option that we are called to make: “to be on the side of life or on the side of death. We see very clearly that on this point no neutrality is possible...either we believe in a God of life or we serve the idols of death.” (Gutierrez 1984:146, note 18).

This option demands that we enter the world of the poor. We cannot see reality from a new perspective, from the perspective of the marginalized unless we are there with them, and we experience what they experience. What Anthony Gittins says applies perfectly to the option required of a missionary with migrants: we have to go beyond hospitality, beyond paternalistic service. We are called to become strangers, migrants with the migrants (Gittins 1994a:414).¹¹¹¹ We have always to be aware that we are neither the initiators of mission nor the ones in charge of it. Paraphrasing Leviticus 25:23 we can state: “For the *mission* belongs to me, and you are only strangers and

¹⁰ 10. Downey 1994:12, upholds in a similar way the cross, the crucified Christ, as the vital center of a truly Christian spirituality.

¹¹ 1. Gittins has been developing in these last years the model of the missionary as stranger as central to Christian mission. This model fits in a special way missionaries with migrants. See Gittins 1989:111-38; also Bevans 1991:51-3.

guests of mine.” The mission finally is not our doing, it does not depend on our good qualities, but belongs to God’s love, holiness and goodness.

This option is not simply a matter of personal conversion or individual asceticism. A sociological perception of poverty and marginalization is necessary if we want to be aware of their subtle strategies and structures. To raise critical questions about our social, political, cultural and religious system is a very important element of our spirituality (Rayan 1992:24). We have to go at the roots of the problem if we want our answer to be effective. In this sense we have to become aware of the sinful social structures which are causing the forced movement of millions of people today in our world. The sociological perception of the strategies and structures which produce poverty and marginalization in our world has to become integral part of our spirituality (Pieris 1988:22).

We make this option in the awareness that to become a stranger among the strangers is not an easy task: it means to take risks, to become vulnerable (Gittins 1993a:13). It means misunderstanding because of critical prophetic stance: “If you talk about the poor, people will probably regard you as sensitive and generous. But if you talk about the causes of poverty, they will say to themselves ‘Is this a Christian speaking? Isn’t such language really political?’” (Gutierrez 1995:8). This kind of misunderstanding could finally lead to a violent persecution as it has already happened in Central America (Sobrinho 1988:87-102). Pieris bluntly points out what expects anybody who decides to make this option: “Whoever dares to be with God on the side of the poor must renounce all hope of being a hero. It is the criminal’s fate - the cross - that Jesus holds out as a banner under which victory is assured.” (Pieris 1988:23).

Once we have made our option for the poor we realize often with great surprise that the marginalized and the “insignificant” are our missionaries because they are teaching us with their very lives what it means to be a Christian. This is the “mission-in-reverse”: the missionaries are evangelized by those they were supposed to evangelize, the masters become disciples, the speakers become hearers, and the givers become receivers (Gittins 1993b:23). We have a wonderful example of “mission-in-reverse” in the encounter of Jesus with the Canaanite woman (Matthew 15:21-28 par. Mark 8:24-30). Here the master, the one who went around crossing and breaking boundaries, the one who chose to be at the margins, is challenged and converted by a Gentile woman! What a masterful and challenging story for our contemporary spirituality for missionaries! We have an outstanding contemporary example of “mission-in-reverse” in the person of Archbishop Romero who was literally converted by his own Salvadoran people. In the field of human mobility the “mission-in-reverse” will take place when we will begin to allow the migrants to be the surprise guests who shake our lives, who prevent us from becoming sedentary people, because there is no place for sedentary people in the world of migrations (Tassello 1991:28).

A SPIRITUALITY FOR THE JOURNEY

The definition of spirituality that I have been trying to develop is rooted in our Christian heritage. The definition of Christian life in terms of walking and of a journey is an integral part of our Judaeo-Christian tradition starting from the journeys of Israel's ancestors in the book of Genesis. Paul in his Letter to the Romans talks about "walking according to the Spirit" (8:4). Different contemporary theologians take on this important theme (Gittins 1993a:17-18; Gutierrez 1984:50). Samuel Rayan describes life itself "as a pilgrimage led by the Spirit who never allows us to strike roots on the road...but impels us forward to the yet-to-be." (Rayan 1992:19).¹²²

It should be clear by now that a spirituality for missionaries with migrants cannot be a static, monolithic, once and for all spirituality. This is a spirituality of the journey: it is the challenging invitation to follow the migrant God together with a migrant people. This is not a spirituality for stable people, but for people who are always on the move together with the migrants and refugees of this world. This is a tentative spirituality, a spirituality of the tent, a spirituality of people who are willing to be in a "permanent exodus" (Tassello 1991:22). Three main characteristics of this spirituality are fidelity, openness and "response-ability".

First of all by *fidelity* I do not mean a formal and punctilious obedience to church laws and commandments, but a creative following of Jesus. A spirit of *fidelity* is needed, which means that "we must be ever ready to accept a new conversion" in the new and changing contexts in which we live (Sobrinho 1988:9). Creative fidelity to the migrant God is to be ready to leave our security behind, and start again the journey whenever God calls us to do so. It is to be willing to "walk humbly with our God."

Openness is in Rayan's words "letting reality, significant for personal and social life and for the health of the earth, come and invade, enter, affect, disturb, challenge, mold and move us to joy, to tears, to anger, to action." (Rayan 1992:22). It is to allow the migrants and refugees to challenge our cultural and religious prejudices, and often untested convictions. It means to be open to changes, open to the complexity of life, to the surprises of life and to a God full of surprises. In this way spirituality will be continually renewed by the discovery of new perspectives and new dimensions of life.

Finally "*response-ability*" is to be willing and ready to respond to the realities that challenge us (Rayan 1992:25). It is to respond seriously and relevantly to the massive phenomenon of migration in today's world. This must be a structural response, namely, a response that touches and transforms the unjust structures that produce poverty, exploitation, marginalization, and forced migration in our world (Tassello 1991:21).

There is no defined and already decided spirituality for missionaries with migrants. This is a spirituality under the banner of the crucified Christ "to the Jews an obstacle they cannot get over, to the Gentiles foolishness" (1Corinthians 1:23).

¹² 12. We do not have to forget that in our Christian tradition the image of the earthly journey or pilgrimage has often been seen in a pessimistic way: the goal of the journey is our "heavenly home", so this earthly stage has to be passed by as soon as possible.

Sometimes we will not even be sure of the relevance and meaning of our missionary task. Sometimes we will be able to see what lies ahead in the journey, and sometimes it will be too dark to see. Sometimes we will stumble and fall on the path, and sometimes we will lose our way. In other words, the path is not clear, and always visible, but as the poet Antonio Machado says, the way is established on the very going (Gutierrez 1984:3). It is in the act of walking humbly with the migrant God that we discover the path. But despite the uncertainties and risks of this journey the migrant God will be there with us enlightening the path in the moments of crisis together with the small lights of our mothers and fathers who have preceded us in this journey.

This is not an endless journey: we are going away to go toward the Reign of God. The end of this pilgrimage is somehow present already on the road, and for that reason, in our first encounter with the migrant God (Brother John of Taizé 1985:19).

And in this journey we will be surprised to meet people who have started from different spiritual traditions and experiences walking in the same path that we have taken. Eventually we will realize that this path is enlightened by the same God, and leads to the same “land flowing with milk and honey” where we will celebrate Life together as brothers and sisters with the whole creation.

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