

Memoria Dei

Words of Spirituality

by ENZO BIANCHI

This *memoria* becomes an inner presence, and this presence becomes prayer - life lived before God and in the awareness of his presence

Two Biblical texts ask Christians to pray “always,” “without ceasing.” In the Gospel of Luke Jesus tells a parable about “the necessity...to pray always without becoming weary” (Luke 18:1), and Paul commands, “Pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). How is this possible? How can we reconcile this request with Paul’s command to work (2 Thessalonians 3:12) and with his own example of working “night and day” (2 Thessalonians 3:8)? And how can one pray while sleeping? These questions traversed early Christianity, monasticism in particular, and the attempts to respond were numerous. The Messalians, also known as the Euchites (“those who pray”), went to the extreme of refusing all work and claimed to devote themselves exclusively to prayer. Another attempt, equally extreme and equally futile, was that of the “acemetes” (“those who do not sleep”), who sought to dedicate themselves to prayer alone by reducing their sleep to an absolute minimum. Cenobitic monasteries, taking a different route, sought to multiply the number of liturgical ‘hours,’ and some monasteries created a form of continual liturgical prayer, or *laus perennis*, by assigning rotations to different members of the community. Still other responses have focused on the inner life: repeating an invocation to God to the rhythm of one’s breath and heartbeat, or even, as in the practice of so-called ‘monological prayer,’ repeating tirelessly a single word, such as the name of Jesus.

The fruit of this focus of the believer’s mind on the name of his or her Lord, this attention that empties the heart of all other thoughts so that the thought of God alone can dwell there, is the *mnéme theou* or *memoria Dei*, the ‘remembrance of God.’ Described in particular in the spiritual teaching of Pseudo-Macarius, the ‘remembrance of God’ is a profound spiritual act of unification of the heart in front of the interiorized presence of God. ‘Remembrance’ is intended here in the sense of guarding in the heart - in other words, in the mind and the depths of the person - God’s presence, and allowing one’s exterior life to be unified and integrated with one’s inner life in the light of this presence. This act of remembering becomes the light by which we live and re-consider the present, judging it in faith. Memoria Dei becomes the source of the discernment that produces spiritual wisdom and makes the believer capable of choosing each act and word in the light of the third person whom he or she makes reign in every relationship, God. The authoritative spiritual man or woman is brought into being by this life-giving memoria. *Memoria Dei* is an act of remembrance that expresses love and desire for God, a profound attachment of the heart, and an awareness of his forgiveness. Pseudo-Macarius writes, “A Christian should always conserve the memory of God, because he or she should love God not only in church, but also while walking, speaking, and eating.” This memoria becomes an inner presence, and this presence becomes prayer - life lived before God and in the awareness of his presence. Through his or her memoria the believer is made the “dwelling of the Lord,” as the apostle Paul affirms. It should be clear, then, that memoria Dei is not simply a psychological act; rather, it is the action of the Holy Spirit.

The fourth Gospel, in which the Spirit has the function of “teaching and reminding” (John 14:26), tells us that the Spirit teaches us everything and reminds us of “all” that Jesus said and did. The Spirit appears here as a memoria of completeness, of a totality communicated not through the sum of Jesus’ actions and words recorded in Scripture, but through the presence of Jesus himself. It is a memoria of Jesus’ words and silence, of the said and the unsaid, the fulfilled and the unfulfilled, the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet,’ and therefore also of that which has not yet taken place. This remembrance, work of the Spirit, is also prophecy. It guides us toward that profound consonance with Christ, with what is at the source of his speaking and acting, that

instills in us the ability to obey the Gospel creatively, guided by the Spirit who makes Christ dwell in us. Concealed within *memoria Dei* is an attitude of gratitude and thanksgiving, faithfulness and commitment, self-surrender and hope. It is an act of remembrance that unifies the past, gives light and meaning to the present, and opens into expectation and hope for the future. We can understand why Gregory of Sinai (14th century) claimed that the command “Remember the Lord your God at all times” is the most fundamental command of all: it is thanks to this commandment that all of the other commandments can be fulfilled.

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