
THE TREE OF OUR CHILDREN IS MORE BEAUTIFUL

THE PRIMORDIAL SEED OF EVERY HUMAN VOCATION IS PRECIOUS

by Luigino Bruni

published in Avvenire on 21/10/2018



“The other, the Man, is ab initio the reciprocant. At the same time, we must not forget the other side of the coin of this ability of the other to reciprocate me. This capacity, in fact, presupposes that the other person represents a “human life” just like mine, and therefore it presupposes the existence of a life of his own and not mine, with his own ego and his own exclusive

world, which are not mine, which are outside and beyond me, which transcend my life”.

José Ortega y Gasset, *Man and People* (rough translation)

Family, work and school are all matters of reciprocity. The care we give remains imperfect unless we sometimes experience being assisted by those we assist, and no education is effective if while doing his lesson the teacher does not learn and change with his students. The relationship between ideal-driven communities and the people who are part of them is also a matter of reciprocity, which lives on a great *closeness* combined with a real *distance*. Nothing on earth is more intimate than an encounter in the spirit between people called to the same destiny by the same voice. That’s when we see the very desires of our heart in the other, when our said and not said words come back to us multiplied and sublimated. We rejoice in the same things, and the joy increases in seeing that the other is rejoicing for the same reasons and in the same way that we are.

This *mutual indwelling* (“wert thou known / To me, as thoroughly I to thee am known.”: Dante, *Paradise*; English translation by the Rev. H. F. Cary, M. A.) is, however, a fully human and humanizing experience if it coexists with respect for a form of *distance*, which protects against the temptation to possess the other, to appropriate that *overflow* which is in its mystery. It is mainly inside this free and saved space that communion lives and feeds itself, which however grows and makes it grow until we leave the other and our heart free to veil a “not yet” that can be revealed tomorrow, but only in part.

This dynamic of closeness-and-distance, already difficult between individuals, is even more demanding in the relationships between the individual and their community. Here, in fact, it can happen that the communion between the personal

and community spirits turns into an operation of *substitution*. Those who arrive in an ideal-driven community are fascinated and submerged by the beauty and spiritual richness they encounter there, which is much more sparkling and seductive than the little voice inside them. In fact, it appears less interesting and luminous than what they find around and outside themselves. That little dowry with which they knock on the doors of the community does not shine and cannot shine, because it is neither a pearl nor a diamond: it is, simply, a *seed*. But it is precisely in that tiny thing that the possibility of a good future, real innovations, surprises, reform, great trees and new fruits lies, both for the person and the community.

Therefore, those responsible should do everything possible to keep that unique and special intimacy in the person alive and fruitful, which *precedes* the encounter with the charisma of the community. And so to dose the transmission of the spiritual heritage and collective ideal very well, with the necessary care and chastity so as not to submerge and suffocate that small primeval seed.

The *principle of subsidiarity*, a pillar of Christian and European humanism, also applies to the management of the individual-community relationship: what comes from the exterior, from above and from outside, is good if it helps what is intimate, close and personal (as a *subsidy*, or support). Much of the quality and maintenance of a vocational history depends on the subsidiary dialogue between these two *intimacies*, especially in the early days; on the capacity not to replace the first intimacy (which is small, naive and simple) with the second (which is great, mature and spectacular). Because that place where a free, attentive, cultivated, critical thought lives and grows is the first intimacy, because it draws on deeper layers than those nourishing the common charisma. It draws water directly from the spiritual tradition that nourishes the same community charisma, and from the traditions of the human civilizations founding both. It is nourished by the prayers of all, not only by our prayers, but the poems, novels and art of all humanity, by the love and pain of every human being and the earth.

But it is almost impossible that this substitution between the two intimacies should not take place, because it is sought and desired by the individual person first of all. The person is deeply fascinated by the new great words they find upon arriving, also because they notice that what comes to them from outside was *already present* within them, and that they are strengthened and exalted in the charismatic community. They know intimately what is given them from outside because while they receive it they recognize it as something that was already intimately present in them. However, when we treat that young woman as if she were coming as a spiritual tabula rasa in Franciscan matters, all we do is we kill that first intimacy in her that already contained essential chromosomes to make herself and *her community* become authentically Franciscan. Authentic spiritual paths do not *begin* but *continue* in a community, because they had already begun outside, in a first intimacy.

After Saul's encounter with the Lord on the road to Damascus, he arrived at Ananias' who baptized him and he received the Christian faith from that community. But Paul always remembered and claimed that his vocation had been earlier than his meeting with Ananias, and that voice continued to nourish him together with the one that spoke to him in his community, and every now and then

it told him words he did not understand: “the gospel (...) I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ” (Galatians 1:11-12). In the communities the main mechanism of spiritual discernment starts from the intimacy of the person and is accomplished in the collective intimacy that becomes the final exegete of individual words. But the reverse process is also essential, when we return to the dialogue of the first intimacy to decipher the collective words that we do not understand, and that - once understood inside and given back outside - enrich everyone. When this second move is missing, the members of the community tend to become all too similar to each other, because the place of anthropological and spiritual biodiversity, and therefore of the richness and generativity of charismas is not the second intimacy, but the *first*.

When human babies are born they are very similar and all seem the same in their first days, and only by growing up do they become different and assume their specific features. In spiritual births, however, the opposite happens: at the beginning we are all very different, each with a unique colour of eyes and hair; then, once we enter a community, over time we tend to become spiritually more and more similar, because the second, collective vocational intimacy grows at the expense of the first. And the intoxicating fusion of the first years gives way to common and equal words that speak less and less.

Spiritual and prophetic communities always struggle to recognize the value of the first intimacy because of the great esteem and consideration they have (and must have) for the second collective spiritual intimacy. Often they see it as the only one necessary, which incorporates and understands the first and is considered as the milk teeth of children, which must fall out in order to let the adult and permanent teeth emerge. And so not infrequently they determine, in good faith, the progressive atrophy of the first vocational place that also sustains the second one - much damage is produced by much good faith, which however does not cancel out the consequences or a lot of pain.

The more it is true for a community that it has a strong prophetic and charismatic dimension, the more naturally and spontaneously it underestimates spiritual experiences prior to arrival. This way they are forgetting that every organization, even the most genuinely charismatic one, has a continuous need for self-regeneration, and the first instrument of this is the prophecy of its people, which however must be recognized and given the space to be cultivated. The people of Israel, too, needed to be accompanied by giant prophets for centuries, even though they were already a holy and prophetic nation. Without the prophets who have continually renewed it (and that the people continued to kill) even that different community would have turned into a religious monolith without the spirit. And what would the Church have become without the thousands of prophets and saints who have called her back to her vocation and conversion a thousand times? So it happens also for every community that is already charismatic by vocation: the providential arrival of prophets *who guard the two intimacies* saves it and converts it every day.

The replacement of the first with the second intimacy is also the root of much malaise in ideal and spiritual communities. The repetition and reiteration of the same collective intimacy for years, which is no longer accompanied and nourished

by that first deep intimate dialogue generates progressive and radical identity diseases in people. The great energy invested in learning the art of answering questions about "who are we?" progressively consumes the ability to answer the other radical question: "and me, who am I?" Anyone who knows the essentials of the spiritual universe knows well that "who am I?" is a question that has no satisfactory answer. But there is a good and a bad way of not answering this question. The first comes from the awareness that the answer changes and grows with us, and that perhaps only the angel of death will reveal it to us as he embraces us. The bad way, on the other hand, is the no-response that comes from going deep inside the heart and finding only attempts to answer it, composed with the collective words declined in the first person plural. The constant and continuous exercise of conjugation of the verbs of life in the plural has consumed the very possibility of a *logos* in the singular; we do not answer "no" because the question has no convincing answers, but because we have forgotten the grammatical and syntactical rules to *understand* the question.

However, when we manage to preserve that first intimacy (and, thanks be to God, it often happens) and defend it with all our strength from ourselves and from our community, we find a great treasure in adult life. It becomes the essential good when the second intimacy of the community withdraws - and it must withdraw - taking away with it the words, images, symbols with which we had embellished our spiritual life and our entire world. There we realize that in that land *there was still a tree*. We embrace it, we feed on its fruits and we enjoy its shadow. And then we discover, moved, that it is the same "tree of life" that we had seen in the Eden of the first paradise, because it grew from the tenacious custody of one of its true seeds. Under that single shadow old and new companions begin to gather, and a new story begins again.

If on the day of the great withdrawal of the waters in our land we do not find any trees, we can set out in desperate search of a good seed and entrust it to that fertile land. It will not be our tree, it will be our children's - and perhaps that is even more beautiful.