

Inner dynamic of relationships: Two operations of charity

What Palau has experienced and transmitted to us, his spiritual followers, is that in life everything is about love. In a heart of each single person living on the earth, there is this desire of loving and being loved. We spend majority of our life, especially of its younger years, in searching for this person/thing that would satisfy this desire and give fulfillment to our existence. We encounter professions that inspire us to give the best of us. We encounter persons who begin to be meaningful for us. It starts with friendship, with willingness of giving something up for the good of other persons. Some friendships become more committed: we fall in love, we start planning life together, we get to know each other better calculating probability of living a lifetime together. When time is right, we get married, promising to take care of this person for a lifetime and to take care of a family. We become fathers and mothers, focused not only on continue deepening in our mutual relationship (although it does remain as one of the main priorities and purposes of our marriage), but also working hand by hand to carry on whole family. And at the end, as we grow older, we discover there was an immense beauty in the eyes of our spouse and that fulfillment is a life commitment to just keep living faithful to one's promises.

The same happens if we choose religious life. We enter because we have discovered Jesus and we found him attractive. At the beginning we may not know much about him or about the requirements of relationship with Him, but we simply fall in love with him and we want to continue getting to know him and falling in love with him. Time arrives when we see clearly that Jesus is worthy of giving up our life for him, that it can be an amazing adventure to follow him closer and closer, during our whole life. That's the time we feel ready to commit our whole life in following Jesus in religious life. We vow to love him above all. If our commitment is true, we continue deepening in our relationship with him, discovering more and more secrets. Until such a time, when we decide to give our life to him totally and completely, forever. Formally we do so in our perpetual profession, but sometimes it takes more time for this experience to happen truly in our spiritual life. This is the experience that the great masters of spirituality called *spiritual matrimony*. And one could think that this is already the end of spiritual journey. But it is not. The journey continues, because suddenly we discover that this matrimony brings children to the world, and these children are all the things we do as a fruit of our union with our Beloved¹. We discover that taking care of God means taking care of this family that we build together with him: the Church. Only in this moment can our relationship with him find its fulfillment. And we will find out that our God is so beautiful not only in his head, but also in his whole body, even when this body is wounded and scorned. This is the goal of every love: to want the good of the beloved person in all its levels, spiritual and material. In relationship with God we achieve it when we learn to love and take care of God in his Church.

It is a common experience for many religious persons that we want to balance our prayer life and time we spend in our mission. We find out that it is not easy to find time for prayer when there are so many obligations in our professional life. We feel this

¹ The First Sunday of Advent we read in the First Reading that „*We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away*” (Is 64:6). It can happen when our good deeds are based only on ourselves, on our desire for self-fulfillment that does not come from a deep relationship with God, that does not hold unto God as an author and a source of all our good desires and actions.

pressure that „Mary and Martha need to get along” (Francisco Palau, *Letter 80*), and we feel that we are failing in our vocation and commitment with God when we abandon him in the chapel. Father Palau discovered one great truth: that to love God in prayer and to love him in a mission are two faces of one and the same love. This is what he would call ***the two operations of love***.

First thing we need to always remember is that for Palau everything in a life is a ***process***. Very rarely things just happen, especially in spiritual life. Even when there are those moments of special grace, special encounter, special closeness and clarity, those go prepared by previous experiences and preparation. „*God is the prince of peace and dwells only in hearts united by love*” (*Letter 7,3*). Only when our heart is united with him in love, God will come to dwell in us. That’s why that two operations is a continual process happening in a soul of a person who is approaching God through meditation. That’s why prayer life is so essential from the same beginning of religious life: we need to build this relationship from the beginning, as far as it is possible for our busy schedules. So before we will touch directly this topic, let us see how Palau sees this process of growing in love.

“The main functions that charity does in a person are two: first, it unites with the object of its happiness, in union with whom consists its perfection; second, it channels its actions and strengths for the good of its neighbours. In these two functions consists the whole Christian perfection: the love God, and our neighbours as ourselves.

Love of God: degrees of growth

1st. God already sowed charity in the garden of our soul on the day of our baptism.

2nd. It is formed in the adults by the practice of acts of piety, which are: frequency of the sacraments, assistance in the celebrations of worship, observance of the precepts of the law, listening to the word of God, spiritual reading, prayers and supplications, almsgiving, and visiting the sick, etc. If an adult loses this by sin, the gardener comes again to sow with the sacrament of reconciliation, and form in it with acts of piety.

3rd. Charity, already formed with the religious practices, is nourished, strengthened and invigorated with the resolutions and firm determination always to strive for perfection, which a person had understood and conceived through the practice of prayer and meditation.

4th. Charity, nourished and vitalized with holy resolutions in the meditation, is strengthened with constancy, with perseverance and with fidelity in the actual performance; with these moral virtues are acquired.

5th. Charity, formed, nourished, strengthened and fortified with fervent practise of all moral virtues, perfects the superior part of a person through the three theological virtues: - faith, hope and charity - and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. With faith and the gifts the understanding of a person is purged, imparting to him the object of his supernatural happiness and disposing him to contemplate the eternal truths.

6th. Faith, representing God to a person as the supreme good – even though it is difficult to obtain and possess, but possible through the assistance of his omnipotence and good works - it disposes, prepares and animates the heart to strive to be united with him.

7th. Charity, having comforted, strengthened and formed the inferior part of a person with the practise of all the moral virtues and, perfecting the superior part through the practise of the theological virtues with fervent acts of love, transforms it into the living image of God and it unites with him. This is the first function of charity.

8th. Charity, after perfecting a person unites him with God through the practise of all the moral, intellectual and theological virtues and of the gifts of the Holy

Spirit disposes all his strengths and actions for the good of neighbours. With this the tree of virtue begins to produce flowers and fruits.

9th. We said that the fruits were not yet ripe after coming out of the flower; it need time to reach its maturity. Charity, after setting in order its actions and strengths and all the virtues of a person for the good of neighbours, it nourishes, strengthens and fortifies and perfects them little by little, with time, through experience and practice.

Once the person is made perfect in the love of God and of his neighbours through the constant practise of all the virtues, he is in disposition and is capable of making heroic acts of perfection. These are the sweet, healthy and ripened fruits that the Holy Spirit produce in a person in due time”

(Catechism of Virtues, 7-8)

Let's go step by step:

1. God already sowed charity in the garden of our soul on the day of our baptism.

Our life is filled with God's love from the very first day of our Christian life. That's why Father Palau was able to say that he felt this passion of love in him since his childhood. God writes in a heart of each person this law of grace: to love and to be loved. That's the deepest desire of every person, and that's the greatest gift that gives to each one of us that enables us to experience love in our life and to respond with love to God and to other people.

2. It is formed in the adults by the practice of acts of piety, which are: frequency of the sacraments, assistance in the celebrations of worship, observance of the precepts of the law, listening to the word of God, spiritual reading, prayers and supplications, almsgiving, and visiting the sick, etc. If an adult loses this by sin, the gardener comes again to sow with the sacrament of reconciliation, and form in it with acts of piety.

This first impulse to love, in Christian life, is developed by the sacramental life and all other practices that help us in discovering God, especially prayer and reading of the Bible. When we lose it because of our sin, we can return to the state of grace through the sacrament of reconciliation. Already in this moment, love is inviting us to search not only for God himself, but also to work for the good of our neighbors, but this care in this stage comes more from the desire of fulfilling the precepts of law than from the experience of the Church as Body of Christ.

3. Charity, already formed with the religious practices, is nourished, strengthened and invigorated with the resolutions and firm determination always to strive for perfection, which a person had understood and conceived through the practice of prayer and meditation.

Only through prayer and meditation we discover the perfection God is calling us to. It is not a kind of perfection we invent by ourselves because we think we know better how to get to God. That would be perfection that leads to self-justification, pride and spiritual egoism. We need to listen to God himself, especially to his Word, to discover his plan for us.

4. Charity, nourished and vitalized with holy resolutions in the meditation, is strengthened with constancy, with perseverance and with fidelity in the actual performance; with these moral virtues are acquired.

Moral virtues are habits that we acquire with our constancy and perseverance. There are virtues that we acquire with actual performance. What does it mean? It means that

we can learn them by doing them. To these virtues belong, among others, courage, honesty, temperance, liberality, generosity, compassion, benevolence etc. If it's true that some people are born with them, it is also true that we can exercise them without possessing them, and in this exercising is how we learn and finally possess them. For all, we need constancy and fidelity.

5. Charity, formed, nourished, strengthened and fortified with fervent practise of all moral virtues, perfects the superior part of a person through the three theological virtues: - faith, hope and charity - and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. With faith and the gifts the understanding of a person is purged, imparting to him the object of his supernatural happiness and disposing him to contemplate the eternal truths.

Moral virtues open us for theological virtues of faith, hope and love. It means that also these three virtues can be learned and acquired². They draw us closer to God, showing us supernatural truths that we cannot learn only by our natural means and efforts. This is also where the process of purification begins: we need to clean our mind of what we have learned about God and allow his Holy Spirit to guide us towards the full truth.

6. Faith, representing God to a person as the supreme good – even though it is difficult to obtain and possess, but possible through the assistance of his omnipotence and good works - disposes, prepares and animates the heart to strive to be united with him.

This is where we begin to desire this true and complete union with God. After a long journey of prayer, contemplation and practicing virtues, when we have opened our heart to the Holy Spirit and known God through the virtue of faith, our heart awakens and feels urgency to strive to live united with God. Because we really know who God is and „Is it possible to know you and not to love you?“ (My Relationships 12,2).

7. Charity, having comforted, strengthened and formed the inferior part of a person with the practise of all the moral virtues and, perfecting the superior part through the practise of the theological virtues with fervent acts of love, transforms it into the living image of God and it unites with him. This is the first function of charity.

And now we arrive to the first operation of love. As we could see, it takes time to arrive at this point. Time and effort. Union with God is pure grace, but this grace is not given to those who don't care for it. It is necessary to pass this whole process of purification, longing, exercising in virtues, of meditating and contemplating. Until such a point that this union becomes like another habit, like it is something natural and not many things can disturb it. As father Palau would say in another place, „This union presupposes and includes the acts of faith, hope and charity and since you have been practicing this for many years, these acts remained impressed and are renewed habitually and implicitly with simple and natural act of love or of union. If this union is attacked, renew these acts, but if there is no direct attack, this are renewed virtually and implicitly in the said act of union. This thing is very simple and natural, because as this union makes itself felt in certain conformity of image between the soul and God, it is enough to present oneself to God“ (Letter 42).

² Only to point out that in our times there are many people who claim to be far from God and from the Church because they don't have faith or because of some bad experiences they had in the past. But sometimes this distance is the effect of a simple laziness, of not even trying to understand who is God, who is the Church, what is the real meaning of the sacraments etc. Faith, at least in some part, can be acquired. And if a person puts an effort on her part, for sure God will not delay and give this great gift of faith to those who seek for it.

8. *Charity, after perfecting a person, unites him with God through the practise of all the moral, intellectual and theological virtues and of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and disposes all his strengths and actions for the good of neighbours. With this the tree of virtue begins to produce flowers and fruits.*

Now, united with God, we are being pushed to go and bear fruits. For this we have been chosen: to bear fruits (J 15:16). When we live united with God, we don't need to lose our energies in striving more, it becomes more natural. It doesn't mean we should not care any more. This union needs to continue strengthening and deepening, because it is still far journey until the spiritual matrimony. But God himself will send us to occupy ourselves in the welfare of others. In the case of Palau, it will be the Church who will push him to do that. „*As our spiritual union is now a consummated fact, there is no need to insist on the matter of love: you love me, I love you, and love is works*” (My Relationships 1,18).

9. *We said that the fruits were not yet ripe after coming out of the flower; it need time to reach its maturity. Charity, after setting in order its actions and strengths and all the virtues of a person for the good of neighbours, it nourishes, strengthens and fortifies and perfects them little by little, with time, through experience and practice. Once the person is made perfect in the love of God and of his neighbours through the constant practise of all the virtues, he is in disposition and is capable of making heroic acts of perfection. These are the sweet, healthy and ripened fruits that the Holy Spirit produce in a person in due time.*

We see that for Palau there is still more. After being united with God, after doing it all for the neighbor, love still needs to grow until it will become perfect. That's why for Palau, our whole life is a novitiate, meaning our whole life we learn how to love, how to be perfect in this love of God and neighbor. „*In the school of Christ the novitiate is lifetime*” (School of Virtues Vindicated II,7).

In his Letter 37, Palau will describe this process in the following words:

“The whole of Christian perfection is based on charity. All the virtues whether divine, human, infused and acquired, theological, moral and spiritual and all the graces, gifts and spiritual assistance granted by the hand of God and of the angels and of men, are all directed to make charity progress in you. Charity has two actions; it breaks forth in the soul in two actions: first, it unites the soul with God. Second, united with God it dedicates the soul to the welfare of the neighbours.

First action: this consists in making your will in all things, actions, thoughts and words, conform to God's will, in a manner that it is no longer you who wills or do not will but what God wills in you, with you and for you. This action of charity subdues, controls and directs the passions of the heart; it excludes the world and its foolish affections, extravagance, vanities; conquers the devil, its caprices, its insinuations; purifies the soul from all sins, be it grave or slight, and from every voluntary and deliberate imperfection. This practical union divinices the heart and soul and work out the growth of one's life; makes it strong with acts of faith, hope and charity accompanied by external works and actions directed by God. And this interior process takes place in the meditation and mental prayer and as far as possible in the incessant awareness of God's presence and by frequent and strong aspirations and ejaculations. This union produces the second effect and that is the love of neighbours.

Second action of charity: Love of neighbours. The soul united with God by love, charity assisted by all virtues and of the graces and gifts of the Holy Spirit,

brings about in the soul the love to the neighbours. Brings about, I say, and it directs and ordains all the energies and virtues of the soul for the welfare of others, this ordered love with tranquility brings about ripe, sweet, nutritious and wholesome fruit. The love of neighbours has to exist, be put in order and acquired before it could burst out into action. And if it is not well-ordered, the action will bud forth green fruits, and the effect will be temerity, indiscretion, rashness; and the soul will be disturbed and restless; and fatigue will take away its repose."

(Letter 37, 1-3)

Palau gives us one important hint: „This interior process takes place in the meditation and mental prayer and, as far as possible, in the incessant awareness of God’s presence”. It means that we really need to take time and effort to build this relationship with God. There is no escape. All our time that we dedicate for prayer in our daily schedule has to aim to this end. More, we are invited to live in the constant awareness of God’s presence with us and in us. The love of the neighbor has to exist before in this love of God. Without it, our actions, our mission, all our good deeds, will be unripe fruits that will make us discouraged and burnt out very fast. We will be restless, without repose, because we do not know first how to find repose in God. Still in other place, Palau will explain it like this:

“(…) the union of your soul with God has to be the object of all your prayer and meditation.

Familiar to this invisible union, you will feel it even without seeing it, you will feel united with God, that is, in peace with the Lord, and here you will stop if you will not recognize the doors to proceed towards the interior. Once you are united with God through acts of faith, hope and charity, when you feel already at peace with God or with no enemy, direct your petition to heaven: that the designs of the providence on you will be realized, fulfilled and be achieved at the proper time.

At the same time begin to look, to contemplate and meditate on Jesus crucified, his moral body which is the Church wounded by heresies and errors and sins; and in effect of this meditation note well on what I will tell you. Kneel at the foot of the cross, adore it, offer and surrender yourself entirely to him so that in you and for you and with you he will do what pleases him. Offer yourself in the holy sacrifice of the Mass together with Jesus, in sacrifice, in expiation of your sins and of the whole world; negotiate in heaven (..) the healing and the comfort of the patient Jesus in his mystical and crucified body”

(Letter 39,6-8)

The love for neighbor is born out of contemplation of the wounded body of Christ, out of faith that this body is not only on the cross in our chapel, but is alive and suffering in our brothers and sisters who suffer daily from so many forms of violence, persecution, poverty etc. It is born there, in the silence of prayer and contemplation. Palau will give us some clear pieces of advice:

“The [soul] searches for God as a spouse to his lover, and what a fortune! She found him! And then? There remains a long way to go and though it is true that the Holy Spirit never abandons a soul he has taken as his own, yet how good it is to have a companion and guide!

The spouse reveals himself to his lover not as a spouse, but as king, as redeemer, as saviour and master of the universe. And there has to be another union. The delights at the beginning of the wedding disappear, and will show up a head crowned with thorns, the master and lord and father of a great family; the head of the body called the Church. Everything has to change. Faith, hope and love are directed always to God; and since God presents himself as king, the soul has to be queen and to reign with Christ. (...)

You women have the possibility of espousing with the Son of God, and this goes well with you. In the first union, there are only the soul and God, and in the

second, the beloved is united with a king, a great lord, the father of a family, with Jesus constituting as head of the body, the Church. In the second union, the spouse gazes at the moral and mystical body of Jesus. This body is of the spouse, it is his, and she is united with him, and this union is ineffable, it is those that the apostle says is a great mystery and the most hallowed sacrament [Eph 5,32]. With us men it works fine to see the Church as bride and marry her, right after the first union. The Church is the moral and the mystical body of Jesus and his body is the object of our love and contemplation. In this we are all one and are united to the same thing.

(...) Let women look at this body under the type and figure of the body of a man, ideally shaped, ever young, without wrinkles or defects, gifted with the highest intelligence, loving, and so on. We men look at this same body under the idea and image of a woman's body, ideally shaped, beautiful, ever young, affectionate, lively, discerning, agile, in whose heart the divine love resides like fire in its own element. Such is the Church.

(...) United with God in faith, hope and love, you have to unite with him with the same bonds, but not insofar as he is God only, or man only, nor God-man regarded individually, but insofar as God forming a moral body with the entire universal Church. You must see and contemplate this body, whose soul is the Holy Spirit, under the shadows and patterns of a man's natural body, and it is with this body animated and vivified by God's Spirit, which speaks, hears, understands and loves, that you have to be united in faith, hope and love."

(Letter 67)

Once more Palau points out the importance of this „double“ union that grows and is acquired in prayer and meditation. For us, palautians, God is forever and inseparably united with humanity, since the moment of Jesus' Incarnation. To love Jesus means to love his body, the whole of Jesus. We cannot love only some part of him; it would be like choosing only some parts of the Bible and rejecting others. We love not only his head, as handsome as a man can only be, but also his body in every moment of his life: in small children being in danger of abortion, persecuted by the powerful of this world; in children who want to study and cannot because they live far from school; in children forced to work in spite of their tender age; in young people who are at the door of their adulthood trying to choose the right path; in those who have to escape from their countries in great danger of losing their life; in people who suffer any kind of injustice etc. For this we need meditation and contemplation, to know well our Beloved, his head and his body. Only this love can bring perfection in action, only then our mission will be mission of love and not of selfishness. This is what makes us different from any other person working for the welfare of others: our love doesn't have its source in ourselves but in God.

I invite you, and I invite myself, in this time of preparation for the beginning of a new year, to give the best of our time and efforts in striving for this union with the Church in prayer, meditations and virtues. This time of pandemic can be a blessed time for us to take advantage of solitude and silence, to dedicate more time to contemplation, the way that when we go out to serve the Church, our love for them will be ripe and perfect, bringing fruits that God wants.

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