

## VOCATIONAL JOURNEY OF FRANCISCO PALAU

For many years, Palau lived anxious for discovering this “something” (or Someone...) who would satisfy his natural impulse to love; he needed that to give plenty and totality to his existence. After many years of seeking, searching, claiming, he discovered the Church. He felt loved with a supernatural kind of love. The Church, his Beloved, was claiming of him with urgency the service and offering of undivided heart, each time more generous and real. His existence could be defined as “being in loving relationship with the Church”, as her spouse and lover.

Palau himself offers narrations of his life as spiritual journey. These will be basis for us to follow his process. In his narrations, Palau could clearly distinguish some stages, with defined dates that gave shape to his spiritual journey:

1. 1811 - 1860
2. 1860 - 1865
3. 1865/6 - 1872

### 1811-1860: Searching for the object of one's love.

“In the first [stage of my life] I went on without guide, without lodestar. My heart, consumed by the passion of love, detached from every temporal and earthly object, searched for the object of its love apart from creatures; but it did not know its Beloved, and not knowing her, what madness, what illusions, what wanderings, what ravings! I loved, and in order to give witness of that love to the one whom I knew existed, but I did not know, I decided to die for her (...) Then I saw that my heavenly Father did not accept my blood. And I had no relations with my Beloved; nevertheless, I offered and gave my life to her, which she did not accept. I went through my life searching for my beloved until 1860. I knew well that she existed, but how far I was from thinking who she is! The object of my love for me was God, in a very confused, vague way, without details. I desired, like everybody, to love and to be loved, to love and to have my love returned; yet this return on the part of my Beloved, I neither had nor believed possible; so my heart cried out searching to love and to be loved” (MR 849-851)

It was a time for searching. Since his childhood Palau felt the urgency of love, but it was impossible for him to identify it. He got attached to created things, searching among what he could encounter beautiful and good in this world. Driven by desire of loving and being loved, he was wandering, trying and failing, making mistakes, committing his love to what couldn't give him satisfaction. After exhausting all possibilities living a “normal” life, he decided to try living an “abnormal” life in the convent. From religion, taught to him by his parents, formators in seminary and carmelite convent, he knew that God was the object of love, but this relation was more similar to a friendship than to a true passionate love that Palau wanted for himself. Until this time he was knowing only “the God of his fathers”, without asking himself this important question: “Who do YOU think I am?”. He experienced that even life in the convent couldn't give him the answers he needed. Religious life widened his heart, made this question possible and inevitable for him. He faced the great challenge of every spiritual journey: to search for his own personal relationship with God, discovering his own God. But this journey is everything but not easy. He couldn't find anyone who would guide him, he felt abandoned (even condemned). The time of a dark night, internal suffering, has begun. There were signs of Her, but he couldn't understand them. If the only way to be happy was to have relationship with Beloved, this could happen only in heaven, he thought and prepared

himself for the ultimate offering: giving his life for the cause of the Church. But instead of bringing him closer, it guided him toward a desert<sup>1</sup> of his life: far from people, far from their answers, far from their guidance. Only him and the One who was going to reveal herself. He followed, detaching himself of everything he knew, opening his heart to the mystery. He made an effort to understand all the events of his life: the old ways have to die, so that the new ways can have their way. Since 1835 until 1860, all enterprises that Palau will be involved into, will go down sooner or later. It's like God didn't want him to get attached to any success he might experience, to be truly free to look for the Church in nakedness and darkness. He needed to be free to be encountered by the Church.

We could draw similarities of Palau's journey with what St. John of the Cross describes in his writings: purification of materia and of the spirit. The path towards spiritual union with God goes through detachment, first of all, from all sensitive things that could hinder the process. There are things that a person can do by herself, called "active night" (it's what Palau did abandoning his normal life, the pleasures, his commodity, his own will); others come not by one's will, but provoked by events and direct action of God (what happened to Palau when he had to leave religious life, when he failed in France, Barcelona, Aitona etc.). For example, if we take a look at Spiritual Canticle no. 3, St. John explains how it is necessary to pass through this period of spiritual solitude to be able of the union of God<sup>2</sup>.

1860-1865: **Moment of revelation. Found the object, union with Her/Him in faith, hope and love.**

"In 1860, to my great surprise, relations began with my beloved. And since these relations was unusual and neither did I believe it nor was it possible, for this reason grace had to work so hard in me to establish them; and these relations have continued up to this day. All my soliloquies and retreats have been directed to only one thing, which is to unite myself in faith, hope and love to my Beloved. This union, I see well, can always be greater and greater, because the more perfect the charity, the more intimate is the heart united with its beloved; and charity grows infinitely and immensely in this world, this union cannot be consummated and be perfect except in glory, because in this life there are always dangers and the possibility of breaking these sacred ties" (MR 851).

If we look at all the encounters that Jesus had with various persons, we can see some common elements. During his life, many people tried to approach him and meet him, and every time, they were surprised because it never was as they expected it to be. Generally, they were approaching Jesus with some purpose in their mind, because they wanted or needed something from him, because they were curious about him, because

<sup>1</sup> Palau would say: "At last, after forty years in search of you, I found you" (MR 1019). It could be possible to make a reference to the history of the Chosen People who guided by Moses travelled for forty years for the desert before entering into the Promise Land. The purpose of this prolonged time was that the generation of Israelites who experienced their life in slavery had to die. God didn't want them to have any memory of their previous life, of how it was to eat "onions of Egypt". He wanted them to be free, to cut all the tides from their past life, so that the generation who would live in the Promised Land would remember only that God takes care for them in every moment of their lives, he is close to them, accompanying them. Their whole life would depend only on Him. For Palau the time of his life until 1860 was a desert: time a learning to forget what he had learned, time of encountering himself in the midst of temptations, time of listening to God's voice alone. Only this way he could enter into the promised land of new relationships with the Church.

<sup>2</sup> "Those who seek God and yet want their own satisfaction and rest, seek him at night and thus will not find him. Those who look for him through the practice and works of the virtues and get up from the bed of their own satisfaction and delight, seek him by day and thus will find him (...) When the soul has departed from the house of her own will and the bed of her own satisfaction, outside she will find (...) her Spouse" (SCB 3:3)

they wanted to follow him. And surprise was coming every time, when they experienced that meeting Jesus meant life-changing encounter. Meeting Jesus changes life's perspective and purpose. It changes a person<sup>3</sup>. It's a *founding experience*, something on which our life will hung from now on. The experience of gratuity of God's love (not the conquest of a person) give fundament to a person, her life, her interior experience and situation.

To better understand what had happened to Palau in his experience, we could search what psychology can tell us about this kind of experience. Psychology will tell us that "*experience* in general terms can be defined as *a form of knowledge*, accompanied by emotions and feelings, that is obtained as a result of *direct reception of an impression of a reality* (internal or external), which lies *outside our control*, that has an *impact on our reaction or consciousness and being*. A religious experience will have a definite relation to a person's religious precepts that describe and uphold the belief in the existence and nature of a divine or superhuman power. It is measured and evaluated within the boundaries of the precepts of the particular religion. The role of the experience is to bring a better understanding of oneself and a revelation of the sacred in order to establish, maintain and develop a relationship with the sacred"<sup>4</sup>. By other hand, J. Garrido will characterize this kind of experience as "being born again by the power of the Holy Spirit. We cannot explain it: it's this experience that will explain us being the original source of all meaning. This transformation that touches that fundament itself of human existence, can be irruptive or gradual. It always determines a new horizon of existence, sustaining in us a new life: God's life in us on God's terms"<sup>5</sup>.

Joseph Ratzinger used to say that the Christians of modern times need to be mystics, or they won't be Christians no more. There no serious following Jesus if there is no experience of a personal encounter with Jesus, because Christianity is not an ideology. This encounter needs to be transforming (life is not the same because Someone is giving the fullness of life); it happens in a daily life, not in extraordinary conditions (it means that we need to develop a special sensibility to see it coming; if we stay away from life because we want to encounter God somewhere else, probably we will never encounter Him); it becomes a corner stone of whole our spiritual life; we will go back to it specially in the moment of difficulties and crisis because it's an experience of being loved unconditionally; it's a measurement of our progress in spiritual journey because only who had this experience will be able to construct new relationships; in any moment, it's a grace, free gift from God; it becomes the source of our service because it is impossible to keep this treasure only for oneself without giving it out to others.

In experience of Fr. Palau we can see that the encounter was all about grace and surprise. Yes, for so many years he was longing for it, dying to finally find the object of his love. But still, encountering with the Church was a big surprise because he's never thought that this encounter, and all the following years of relationships, were even possible. But that time of longing and preparation was necessary, because encounter with God, encounter with the Church, is all above love. The Church reveals herself only to those who truly love her, who remained faithful to her in all life's trials, who have

<sup>3</sup> What happens in encounters with Jesus can be resumed into the following: 1) It will often not be what we expected; 2) Addresses questions we didn't know needed answer; 3) Reveals the gross part of us; 4) Gets to the true heart of issue; 5) Sends us out to tell others about him. (<https://www.cbcfamily.org/5-things-that-happen-when-you-encounter-jesus/>)

<sup>4</sup> S.P.Pretorius, *Understanding Spiritual Experience in Christian Spirituality*, in: *Acta Theologica Supplementum* 11, 2008, pp. 148-149.

<sup>5</sup> J. Garrido, *Proceso humano y gracia de Dios. Apuntes de espiritualidad cristiana*, Sal Terrae 1996, p. 283.

proven their love and faith for her. Palau will discover, surprisingly, that relationships with the Church are mutual: looking at each other, loving each other, offering life for each other. That the more he loved, had faith, trusted, the more darkness would vanish.

Like any relationship in life, this one also takes time to consolidate. From Palau we need to learn to give ourselves time for this relationship. Any kind of spiritual experience we might have still needs to grow, it's not a final. It took 5 years to Palau until he will "reap the harvest" of this experience, until he will discover its full meaning and totality of his vocation. He needed to grow in hope, love and faith, virtues indispensable in this inner journey, to gradually receive the fullness of this experience. But the change has begun, although still accompanied by uncertainty and doubts. It cost Palau great work to admit that he was worthy of these relationships. He would constantly doubt of his capacity to remain faithful. Because if this experience is real, it brings with it self-knowledge and consciousness of one's truth. That's why it is seen as a grace of which a person feels unworthy. It's this evidence of one's limitation and God's grace that puts us on our knees and makes us sing the mercies of the Lord with heart full of thankfulness. It was this evidence that made Palau exclaim again and again "How happy is the own who knows you, Oh Church!"

#### 1865-1872: **United with Beloved, striving to serve Her/His needs.**

"The presence of my Beloved now does not cause me those great sensations as it did at the beginning, because my heart is content with her, and I have found her. Although, I fear and tremble at the idea that I can lose her and be separated from her, and it is true that there is the sorrow of being unable to see her except under the mysterious veil and mystery and not face to face as I desire; if it is true that that union is very imperfect because of the ability and possibility of breaking it, yet now I am not searching anymore, but that joy and hope: believing, enjoying, hoping, sorrow and love all together and at the same time, there is no sadness without joy or joy without sadness; the possession of the Beloved in the love of charity not being indestructible and imperishable, brings at times, shocks, suspicions, worries, doubts, fears and anxieties which are harder than death, but I am not searching anymore because the heart has what it desires.

Now I am going to begin another stage of life and in a very distinct way of proceeding before God and in my relations with the Church. And it consists in this: having found the beloved object, the strength of the spirit is not occupied in searching it, so its energies must be directed to serve and to fulfil the mission which the heavenly Father thinks fit to give me with respect to it. (...) Now I am beginning a new way of proceeding which is completely unknown to me, and for which I need prayer; but as I now have my Beloved, this does not worry me so much" (MR 851-852).

Palau experienced that his relationship with the Church has its own dynamics and progress. It started with shy attempts of knowing Her, discovering her nature, beauty, personality. At the beginning, this relationship was growing inside the boundaries of a friendship, of admiration, loyalty, readiness to help even at the cost of one's own commodities. But as time went by, Palau felt that friendship was not enough, that his heart, created to love and to be loved, was opening to receive the Church as his Spouse. He offered his life to her, in total availability, come what may. And amazingly he discovered that it still was not the end of journey. Because after the matrimony was consumed, the Church showed herself to him not anymore as his beloved spouse, but as a mother of many nations. And suddenly Palau felt himself being called to become a father of these nations. Searching for love was done, and his energies had to be oriented

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in different direction: to fulfill the mission given to him by God and become a father in the Church, for the Church reflected in all her members.

That's what matrimony is about. "If you love me, take care of me (...) I will take care of you"<sup>6</sup>. It's this mutual care and concern for other that makes love of the spouses alive and real. It's not saying constantly "I love you", not even feeling these strong emotions as one felt at the beginning. It is a commitment to build a family. Palau felt being a father, with all its obligations and responsibilities. He discovered his mission, the full meaning of his existence.

What can we learn from Palau in this stage of his life? That the first fire of love will pass, so don't get anxious if you don't feel anymore the things you used to feel before. That we can never be caught out of guard! The union can be lost if we stop taking care for it, and maybe it is even easier to be lost because of not feeling such strong emotions as before. That there will be a moment of surety of being in the right path; still, the discernment never ends, although its object changes (not anymore questions if I have vocation, but how to express my vocation). That to love means to care, to build a family being a mother in the Church and for the Church in all Her members, especially those marginalized and not loved by anyone. And that real fulfillment in this life is possible and achievable, but it takes time, so if at the beginning of your vocational journey you don't feel fully satisfied, just wait and be patient. It doesn't mean automatically that you don't have vocation or that you are in the wrong place<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> MR 753.

<sup>7</sup> S. Sinek, *The Infinite Game*, Portfolio 2019.