



**C.Ss.R.**

# PIRITUALITY

ONE BODY (Eph 4,4)

UN SOLO CORPO (Ef 4,4)

UN SEUL CORPS (Eph 4,4)

UN SOLO CUERPO (Eph 4,4)

JEDNA WSPÓLNOTA (Ef 4,4)

UM SÓ CORPO (Ef 4,4)

EIN LEIB (Eph 4,4)

## ONE BODY ADVENT 2

### Biblical Testimonies for Advent

#### Meditation 2

#### Elisabeth and Zechariah

#### Patience and Prayer, the two means to face sadness: The Witness of Elizabeth and Zechariah

I propose in this second meditation, **the Biblical testimony of Elizabeth and Zechariah**, recounted in the *Gospel of the infancy of Luke* (Lk 1:5-25) for our preparation - both personal and community - for the coming of the Lord, reflecting on our lives with the desire to align it more closely to the Gospel.

Elizabeth and Zechariah, the elderly married couple felt excluded, humiliated, disappointed: because they had no children. Elizabeth was said to be "barren" and Zechariah advanced in age. Of both it is said "**they were righteous before God and kept all the laws and prescriptions of the Lord**" (Lk 1:6). That is, this couple behaved in accordance with the will of God as expressed in the Law, in the Word of God. They lived according to the ideal of Jewish piety. But, despite their holiness of life, they had no children.

What is surprising in the Lucan account, which is rarely found in the Bible, is the adjective "**just**" being referred to a woman. And it is precisely this characteristic of Elizabeth that the evangelist Luke evokes. This fact is particularly significant. In the attribute "**just**" is summed up the entire spirituality of the Old Covenant. "The "righteous" are people who live the indication of the Law from within, people who by their being righteous according to the revealed will of God proceed on their way and create space for the new action of the Lord."<sup>1</sup> It is clear that the sterility of Elizabeth, a woman who has been faithful to God's will for many years, is not a punishment for her sins.

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<sup>1</sup> J. RATZINGER, BENEDETTO XVI, *L'infanzia di Gesù*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano 2012, 28. (The Infancy of Jesus).

We must remember, that for the mentality of the time, not being able to have children meant being deprived of God's blessing, because of one's sins.

G. ROSSÉ notes: "Sterility, old age are expressions of a situation without a future. But in reality, it is the condition in which God will be able to manifest his power of grace."<sup>2</sup> In contrast, however, to how people see and judge. Yet, how differently God sees us. In the people's eyes Elizabeth and Zechariah were punished by God, in God's eyes, on the other hand, Elizabeth and Zechariah were chosen. The two elders are presented as those members of God's people, in whose life the mission of election is realised and to whom God has promised his blessing.<sup>3</sup>

And although Elizabeth and Zechariah were so pious, so good, that they had kept the commandments of the Torah, bad things and misfortune happen to them. They have no offspring. They could have rebelled against God, at best they could have stopped praying to God (after all, that is how one often behaves!), while this couple continue to remain faithful.

And here is the first clue that these Advent witnesses give us. Elizabeth and Zechariah can be for us, **teachers of patience and prayer. And it is precisely on patience and on prayer, that I have decided to dedicate this second meditation.**

From the Gospel of Luke, we learn something interesting, namely that Zechariah, although he was advanced in age, when he was in the temple he continued to pray, asking the impossible. The angel who appeared to him said: "Zacharias, your prayer has been answered and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John" (Lk 1:13). The father is called, as is the custom, to name the newborn child. John is a popular version of the Hebrew name *Yo-hanan*, formed from the proper name of *YHWH* and the root *hanan*, which is the root of grace, of love. *Yohanan* means 'God has [shown] mercy'. Finally, God has remembered.

But alongside the patience and faithfulness of Elizabeth and Zechariah, there was also **their sadness**. According to the Greek hermit Evagrius the Pontic (4th century), 'sadness' is one of the 'eight spirits of wickedness'. His disciple, the monk John Cassian (4th-5th cent.) calls these eight spirits the "deadly sins". Which are they? Gluttony, Lust, Avarice, Wrath, **Sadness**, Sloth, Vainglory, Pride, are the eight vices roughly from the Greek spiritual and moral tradition. Zechariah and Elisabeth were not tempted to live a life of sadness? Precisely this couple who have overcome sadness are witnesses and teachers to show us that sadness is overcome with patience and persistent prayer.

The Hebrew name Zechariah means 'God remembers [remembered]'. It is composed of the suffix "YA" - which is God's proper name - and the verb "ZAKAR" meaning "to remember". So, it is a name that carries within it the idea of remembrance: 'ZAKAR-YA', i.e., 'Yahweh remembered'. Yahweh always remembers. Elizabeth also has a significant name. "EL" (short for *ELOHIM*) is the common name for God and the verb root indicates "the oath". Her name in fact means "God has sworn. God is faithful as a rock". The name Elisabeth also contains in itself almost a programme for life: 'I will also be faithful, I will be patient, I will pray with perseverance'. Zechariah and Elisabeth fought the sadness

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<sup>2</sup> G. ROSSÉ, *Il Vangelo di Luca. Commento esegetico e teologico*, Città Nuova Editrice, Roma 1992, 38. (The Gospel of Luke. Exegetical and Biblical Comment)

<sup>3</sup> Cf. M. WOLTER, *Das Lukasevangelium*, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 2008, 74. (The Gospel of Luke).

that continued to affect them, and they did so **with the virtue of faithfulness, and with patient trust in God.**

“The virtue of fidelity is profoundly linked to the supernatural gift of faith, becoming expression of that solidity proper to those who have founded their whole life in God. Indeed, in faith we find the only guarantee of our stability (cf. Is 7:9b), and only from it can we in turn be truly faithful: first of all, to God, then to one’s family, the Church, which is mother and teacher, and in it to our vocation, to the history in which the Lord has placed us.”<sup>4</sup>

Sadness is an emotion we are all familiar with. Sadness is one of the six basic or primary emotions along with joy, surprise, fear, anger and disgust. Sadness is a natural emotional response when we experience a painful and unpleasant event. We may have experienced it as a result of the loss of a loved one, following the failure of a project that is important to us, following unforeseen and difficult changes. Sadness can also manifest itself in situations where someone may feel neglected, unrecognised, not understood. Sadness can assail us in the face of uncertainties and worries, the difficulties faced by consecrated life in its various forms: “the decrease in vocations and ageing, especially in the western world, the economic problems following the serious world financial crisis, the challenges of internationality and globalisation, the pitfalls of relativism, marginalisation and social irrelevance.”<sup>5</sup>

The Apostle Paul distinguishes between a virtuous "**sadness according to God**" and another "**according to the world**", which is vicious, when he writes in 2 Cor 7:9-10: "**yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.**" Paul affirms therefore that sadness can be good or bad: it depends on the effects it produces in us.

For the Fathers of the Church and the monastic authors by sadness 'according to God' they mean "the humble gaze (filled with hope and joy) on the truths of one's own heart and the wounds of one's own life, as spaces open to God's possibilities".<sup>6</sup> Such a sadness 'is capable of fostering the conversion of Christians from sinful behaviour, it is, therefore, directed towards their salvation'.<sup>7</sup>

There is a 'sadness of the world' - precisely that from which human beings seem to suffer today – a sadness that leads to discouragement, apathy, despair [or even to aggression], renders any possible

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<sup>4</sup> BENEDETTO XVI, «La fedeltà di Dio è la chiave e la sorgente della nostra fedeltà», Discorso alla Pontificia Accademia

Ecclesiastica, Lunedì 11.06.2012, (The Faithfulness of God is the key and the fount of our faithfulness) in: <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2012/06/11/0344/00807.pdf> [accesso: 10.11.2023].

<sup>5</sup> FRANCESCO, Lettera apostolica a tutti i consacrati in occasione dell’Anno della Vita Consacrata, 21 novembre 2014,

n. 3 in: [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/apost\\_letters/documents/papa-francesco\\_lettera-ap\\_20141121\\_lettera-consacrati.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco_lettera-ap_20141121_lettera-consacrati.html) [accesso: 10.11.2023]. (Francis, Apostolic Letter to all consecrated persons on the occasion of the Year of Consecrated life).

<sup>6</sup> A. PIOVANO, *Tristezza*, Edizioni San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo (Milano) 2012, 135. (Sadness)

<sup>7</sup> F. MANZI, *Seconda Lettera ai Corinzi*, Paoline Editoriale Libri, Milano 2002, 232. (Second Letter to the Corinthians).

prospect of conversion meaningless. Such worldly sadness springs from a heart that has lost hope. And already Evagrius had realised that sadness can even become the 'prison of a people', i.e., it can affect an entire society, turning into a shared global vision towards a hopeless future.<sup>8</sup> The 'sadness of the world' is an exaggerated reaction to evil, which turns into despair, into a total loss of hope in God's providence.

Let us recall here **Job from the Bible**. The Bible says the same thing about him that we have heard about Zechariah: that "he was a righteous man, he feared God, and he was free from evil" (Job 1:1-3). Job's faith was tested in every respect. Job was the innocent man afflicted by evil; the righteous man afflicted by the injustice of suffering. Job suffered the loss of all good, but above all the death of his seven sons and three daughters who died in the collapse of the house. He was also struck by a disease, terrible leprosy, which caused him enormous suffering. Job was overcome by sadness. The Bible testifies to this: "**Then Job got up and tore his cloak; he shaved his head, fell to the ground, prostrated himself**". **Then he said to God in a pained prayer: 'The Lord gave, the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord!'**".

Next to Job, who prayed in pain, stood his wife. She too was suffering; she too had been overwhelmed by those trials together with her husband. But she gave terrible advice (Job 2:8-9) that was like a force to blame and abandon God. Job understood that his wife was speaking in severe sadness that had turned into despair and anger, and he answered her: "If we accept good from God, why should we not accept evil?" (Job 2:7-10). Job did not fall into despair. All the while he continued to talk and argue with God. Even though he does not understand God's action, all the time he remains in relationship with God. This is positive sadness, which does not become despair. The state of mind of the wife of Job is different. Her sorrow leads her to despair, to blasphemy: she turns away from God. The biblical example of Job and his wife shows how sadness – partly justified by the misfortune that befell them – can be experienced differently.

**□ So let us ask ourselves an important question: How do we react to sadness? How do we deal with it? How do we get through it?**

In the Garden of Olives Jesus says to the disciples: "My soul is sorrowful unto death. Stay here and keep watch" (Mk 14:34). We can see that the sadness that afflicts Jesus leads him to pray. According to Jesus, the best cure for sadness is prayer, is to draw near to the Father, is to remember that I am a son, a daughter of God, that I am not alone, even if I am facing uncertainties, worries, difficulties.

The appropriate response to sadness is therefore prayer. Zechariah did not stop praying in times of sadness. Job did not stop praying when he was overwhelmed by sadness. Jesus in mortal sadness prays. Only prayer is the appropriate response to sadness. Francis de Sales writes in the Introduction to the Devout Life, also called *Philotea* (God-loving soul), published in 1609: '**If anyone is sad, let him pray: prayer is the most effective remedy because it raises the spirit to God, our only joy and consolation**'.

The appropriate response to sadness is, therefore, to persevere in prayer, and – praying - have patience. St Alphonsus in the book *The Practice of Loving Jesus Christ* thus advises: "**(..) to bear with**

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<sup>8</sup> Utilizzo il pensiero di A. PIOVANO, *Tristezza*, 12-15. (Using the thoughts of A. Piovano, *Sadness*)

patience every pain, every scorn, every contrariety, more than any reasoning, following the example of the Saints, prayer helps, by which we obtain the strength which we do not have, to overcome torments and persecutions".<sup>9</sup> And our saint in the work *Compilation of the virtues in which a soul must exercise itself if it wishes to lead a perfect life and become holy* recommends: "Discourage sadness, preserving in all events a tranquillity and serene countenance always uniform. Whoever wants what God wants must never be afflicted".

The virtue that fights and transforms sadness is therefore patience. The word 'patience' comes from the Latin '*patire*', meaning 'to suffer, to endure'. Patience is one of the great virtues of the Christian tradition. In the New Testament, two words are translated in Greek as 'patience' - *hypomoné* [to hold under], also means 'to remain less, persevere, bear burdens'. The word *makrothymía* used in the twenty-second verse of the fifth chapter of the letter to the Galatians may have the Hebrew root meaning 'long anger', the ability to withhold anger for a long time [longsuffering - longanimity].<sup>10</sup> The patient person is able to tolerate much pain and suffering without complaining, gets angry slowly, and waits for God to console him and cleanse his sin.

We cannot generate this virtue in ourselves completely independently because patience is first and foremost a gift of the Holy Spirit that is received in prayer. **Patience has its place in the fruits (works) of the Holy Spirit:** "The fruits of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience (makrothymia), kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, self-control" (Gal 5:22). Whether a Christian has the Holy Spirit is evident from three things: (1.) he maintains peace in difficulties; (2.) he knows how to forgive and he forgives; (3.) he is patient towards those who are still on the way. Let us not forget that Elizabeth was "filled with the Holy Spirit" as soon as she heard Mary's greeting. And Zechariah, after the birth of John the Baptist, **enlightened by the Holy Spirit**, intoned his hymn of joy and blessing: "Blessed be the Lord, God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people".

I would like to recall here the appeal concerning sadness that the Holy Father Francis addressed to consecrated persons: "One day we responded to the Lord's call and, with zeal and generosity, we offered ourselves to Him. Along the way, along with consolations, we have also received disappointments and frustrations. At times, the enthusiasm of our work is not matched by the desired result. Our sowing does not seem to bear the appropriate fruit, the fervour of prayer weakens and we are not always immunised against spiritual dryness. It can happen, in our consecrated life as consecrated persons, that hope is worn out by disappointed expectations. We must have patience with ourselves and confidently await God's times and ways: He is faithful to His promises. This is the foundation stone: He is faithful to His promises. Remembering this allows us to rethink the paths, to

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<sup>9</sup> ALFONSO M. DE LIGUORI, *Pratica di amar Gesù Cristo*, Città Nuova Editrice, Roma 1996, 157. (Practice of the love of Jesus Christ).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. "Good and merciful is the Lord, slow to anger and great in love" (Ps 102:8). The Hebrew expression "*erek 'appayim*" - "slow to anger" ("longanime" - makrothymos in the LXX translation) means "length of nostrils (where anger flares up - cf. Ex 34:6; Nu 14:18). The Greek term *makrothymia* (longsuffering) literally means "length of spirit" (cf. Rom 2:4), both the Hebrew and the Greek expression denote patience, forbearance, slowness to wrath. Of the term 'longanime', from longus (long) and animus (soul), the *Dizionario Enciclopedico Italiano* (Treccani, vol. VII, p. 112) gives the following definition: 'Who endures for a long time, with constancy, patience and goodness of mind ... generous person, ready for forgiveness and indulgence'.

reinvigorate our dreams, without giving in to inner sadness and mistrust. (...) The sadness in us consecrated persons is a worm, which eats us from within. Flee from inner sadness!"<sup>11</sup>

The virtue of patience is not much practised today. Patience is an undervalued virtue in our century, marked by agitation and marked by speed. Life, however, is not a 'fast food restaurant', but a patient pilgrimage. Patience is the fortitude of spirit that enables us to "bear the burden" of personal and community problems; it makes us welcome the diversity of others; it makes us persevere in the good even when all seems futile; it keeps us going even when tedium and sloth (Greek *akedia*: aversion to working, mixed with boredom, indifference and laziness, i.e., negligence in the exercise of virtue) assail us.

In the year 1971, in his Apostolic Exhortation on the evangelical witness of religious life *Evangelica Testificatio* Saint Pope Paul VI wrote: "This world, today more than ever needs **to see in you men and women, who have believed** the word of the Lord, his resurrection and eternal life, to the point of committing their earthly lives **to witnessing the reality of this love, which is offered to all men.**" The Church has not ceased, throughout its history, to be enlivened by so many holy men and women religious who, in the diversity of their vocations, were living witnesses to a boundless love and to the Lord Jesus." (53).

### **Perspectives and further questions for one's own reflection:**

- 1) A perspective out of Nazareth (Lk 2:48): "Son, why have you done this to us? Behold, your father and I distressed, were looking for you". And he said to them: "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be about my father's business?". How can we welcome anguish and "innocent" sadness as an existential participation in the mystery of salvation?
- 2) An Easter perspective (Mt 26:38): "My soul is sorrowful unto death; stay here and keep watch with me": How can one participate in the "salvific sadness" of Christ (to go through all human sadness, so that one can find oneself in The Lord even when one is sad because one is terrified)?

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<sup>11</sup> FRANCESCO, Omelia, Festa della Presentazione del Signore. XXV Giornata Mondiale della Vita consacrata, Basilica di San Pietro, 2 Febbraio 2021, (Homily for the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord. XXV World Day of Consecrated life) in: [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/messages/consecrated\\_life/documents/papa-francesco\\_20210202\\_omelia-vitaconsacrata.pdf](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/messages/consecrated_life/documents/papa-francesco_20210202_omelia-vitaconsacrata.pdf)



ONE BODY is a text of prayer proposed by the Center for Redemptorist Spirituality. For more information: Fr. Piotr Chyla CSsR (Director of the Center for Spirituality - [fr.chyla@gmail.com](mailto:fr.chyla@gmail.com)).