



"Jesus is my hope, and the living source of my happiness"
Padre Pio Prayer Groups, pilgrims of hope

SECOND SHRINE

The Kingdom of God

BIBLICAL COMMENTARY

From the Gospel according to Luke (17:20-25)

The Pharisees asked him, "When will the kingdom of God come?" He answered them, "The kingdom of God does not come in such a way as to attract attention, and no one will say, 'Here it is,' or, 'There it is.' For behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst!"

He then said to the disciples, "The days will come when you will want to see even one of the days of the Son of Man, but you will not see him. They will say to you, "There he is," or, "Here he is"; Don't go there, don't follow them. For as the lightning flashes from one end of heaven to the other, so will the Son of Man be in his day. But first it is necessary for Him to suffer much and to be rejected by this generation."

The pages of the Old Testament narrate the epic tale of the chosen people who testify with their faith to the uniqueness and holiness of God in countries that were dedicated to pagan cults and customs. The sacred authors do not hide, however, how difficult their testimonies are and this is because the human heart is extremely fragile, often seduced by the ambiguities and customs proper to that world. It should instead be a sign of fidelity to the Covenant with the Lord.

For this reason, the prophets read the sufferings of the people as an opportunity for conversion and interior renewal. At the same time they announced a day on which God would come to visit his people, to give them a new heart, to make his Kingdom stable forever.

In the Pharisees' question we can read the questions and the challenge of the man of all times: "When will this kingdom of God come, since you, Jesus, are here, but the injustice of the Romans and the wickedness of the people are still there?" Today we could say: "Where are you, Lord, if there continue to be wars, divisions and wickedness due to the indomitable wickedness of man?"

Jesus does not take God's side, announcing He who will triumph, putting an end to the power of Rome and all wickedness, because he did not come to change the events of history. From the moment of creation, the time of faith began, in which man – with his help – is called to give his answers, to show his fidelity in a concrete way. It is the story of the wheat that must grow with the weeds, of the sea in which there are good fish and bad fish and of the grain that must die to bear fruit; no one can exempt us from the trial by deluding us with vain promises: "Here he is, or there he is."

Jesus announces something truly important: "the Kingdom of God is in your midst" or even more, if we want to use the other meaning of the Greek verb *entòs umon*, which means, 'the kingdom of God is within you'.

This is the Church: a people who bear witness to this Kingdom, which present in the human heart. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states: "The Lord Jesus began his Church by preaching the Good News, that is, the coming of the Kingdom of God promised for centuries in the Scriptures. To accomplish the Father's will, Christ inaugurated the Kingdom of heaven on earth. The Church is the Kingdom of Christ already present in mystery" (n. 763).

SPIRITUALITY

From a letter by Padre Pio to the Ventrella sisters (Epist. III, p. 564)

The Wise Man praises the strong woman saying: "Her fingers, he says, knew how to handle the spindle". I will gladly tell you something about these words. Your distaff is the accumulation of your desires; therefore, I suggest you should spin a little every day, pulling your designs thread by thread until they are executed and you will invariably come to the end of them. Be wary not to hurry, for you will twist the thread with knots and block your spindle. Therefore keep walking, and although you will proceed slowly, you will nevertheless make a great journey".



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In Padre Pio's Letters we find a series of community letters, that is, letters that were addressed to his spiritual daughters and his disciples, that were like small exercises for them to put those teachings and reflections on the Word of God into practice. This was a path intended for all of them, a path of a faith they were to share together, to help them read and evaluate together the way of sacrifice and Christian mortification. We do not look for suffering on purpose, to subdue our bodies. Our corporal penance leads us to give up our ego in favour of a sense of community, especially in that commitment that we must have in seeking to welcome one another in order to proclaim the Kingdom of God together.

Padre Pio has a clear concept about this: when we want to renew ourselves or society by acting alone, we might always do it for our own purposes, or else to impose our views and goals on others, or – more simply – we might commit the sin of vainglory. The Church, the people of God, instead act as a community and together we want to change society, renewing the human heart.

The sharing of this journey is slow, it passes through the history of every man and woman who must renounce their own selves in favour of the community they belong to, not just for any standardization, but so as to build a unity in the body of Christ. This is why Padre Pio recommends we should learn how to wait, how to progress without haste, because – like the woman who works on the spindle – if we were to rush and expect others to change suddenly, in the hope that everyone would suddenly become good, we would thus risk, as in the loom, to make the threads twist.

Padre Pio synthesizes all this with the image of the Kingdom of God.

To Raffaolina Cerase he wished that the Lord would "make her more and more worthy for the kingdom of heaven"; and in the moment of trial he recommended she resisted the temptations that are the evident sign that in her "the Kingdom of God is being established". Padre Pio often returned to the image of the devil who works to hinder the rooting of the Kingdom of God in us, sometimes inviting us to "support the war... for the complete overthrow of the kingdom of Satan" (*Epist.* III, p. 649), at other times he explained that God allows temptations in order to entice us to virtue, to achieve "the building of the mystical edifice". To him our venial sins are to be seen as "spies" that run hither and thither in the Kingdom of God, who allows them so that we can be on guard and understand our weaknesses (cf. *Dolcissimo Iddio, Epist.* M, 144).

The Inner Kingdom

The coming of the Kingdom of God is a constant preoccupation in Padre Pio's writings, its main reason being that he connects this image with our interior life. This is one of his characteristic expressions: "the inner kingdom": "My God, my beloved daughter, how happy the inner kingdom is when this holy love reigns there! How blessed the powers of our soul are, when they obey such a wise a King!" (*Epist.* III, p. 697). This expression, used for the first time in a letter of July 1917, will often appear in subsequent letters. After the stigmatization it will become a Christmas wish: "May the Child Jesus always reign over your heart and establish and strengthen his kingdom within you more and more!" (*Epist.* III, p. 881).

Padre Pio obviously did not detach himself from the religious tradition, especially the Franciscan one, which every year on the occasion of Christmas, envisaged the opening of one's heart to welcome God. In his teachings, however, he wanted to go further. For him, while reflecting on the Incarnation of Jesus we are requested to perceive the dynamic value of his presence in our lives. To Cesare Festa, a Genoese Freemason who retracted his membership in the sect and began a journey of faith under the personal guidance of Padre Pio, he wrote: "I am incredibly happy to know that the kingdom of God is increasingly being established in your heart. I give infinite thanks to the Most High, and at the same time I beseech him to make you more and more his own, pouring out upon you all the treasures of his wisdom and goodness" (*Epist.* IV, 617). The conversion had taken place, but not everything was accomplished. The same wish Padre Pio would invoke onto his own spiritual director, Father Augustine, on the occasion of his name day, "May Jesus, with the abundance of His consolations, make you happy and make you worthy of his kingdom" (*Epist.* I, p.490). We are not faced with a snapshot of Christmas, but with a journey in which God becomes the main character within human history.



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The prophetic face: the community

We can certainly say that the Prayer Groups are the fruit of the vision that Padre Pio had of the Kingdom of God. He wanted a community prayer that is not the result of occasional encounters, but the result of that personal work to build the internal kingdom and to make it dynamic, available to others, knowing how to grasp their needs and difficulties. It is in this sense that the path that led to the founding of the hospital 'Casa Sollievo della Sofferenza' should be seen. From the first years of Padre Pio's stay in San Giovanni Rotondo, we witness a gradual preparation of those who will be his first collaborators in his choices of charity. When he personally involves the group of those who will found Casa Sollievo, they will all be people who had made a journey of faith with him, often suffered and were marked by great sacrifices. There is also a very interesting formal aspect. Although Padre Pio is universally recognized as the founder of Casa Sollievo, he was not present at the founding act of the first joint-stock company: it was the lay people he had trained who made the decisions and took on its responsibility. Even later, both in the work phase and in that of the organization and administration of the Clinic, Padre Pio was always present with his animation and his suggestions, but he never entered into the management operations. This is the prophecy of a Church that will be born from Vatican II, a Church that gives space to the laity and always operates as a leaven of society without wanting to impose its presence.

The Kingdom of God Is Within Us

The intensity with which Padre Pio lived his commitment to the Kingdom of God suggests an actualization of his message that passes first of all through our individual journey and our willingness to commit ourselves as a community in the life of the Church.

Here are some useful questions. Do we really feel involved in praying for the coming of the Kingdom of God? What do we do concretely to entice to prayer those people who may need a word of hope and support? Are our forms of prayer always the same, or are we able to propose spontaneous intentions, different forms of prayer, attention in the liturgies?

To what extent are we willing to lose something of our private life, to build the community?

These and other questions will have meaning if our personal and community prayer is lived in truth and in generous listening to the Word of God.

PRAYER

Prayer to saint Pio from Pietrelcina by Cardinal Comastri

Padre Pio, you lived in the century of pride, yet you were so humble.
Padre Pio, you lived among us in the age when people dreamt of wealth,
they would gamble and even worship it, yet you were faithful to your vows of poverty.
Padre Pio, no one heard your voice next to you: yet you spoke with God;
near you no one saw the light: yet you saw God.
Padre Pio, while we were running breathlessly,
you remained on your knees and saw the Love of God nailed to a tree,
you saw the wounds in his hands, his feet and his heart: eternal wounds!
Padre Pio, help us weep before the cross,
help us believe in Love, help us hear the Mass as God's weeping,
help us seek forgiveness as an embrace of peace,
Help us be Christians with wounds that shed the blood of faithful and silent charity:
like the wounds of God! Amen.

HYMN