

The “Smart” Era and the Need for Contact

“Does the insistence of the Christian tradition on the salvific value of the flesh still make any sense? And if so, why? In the Feast of the Epiphany recently celebrated, we meet three characters...” The article of Davide Prospero in the Corriere della Sera.

by Davide Prospero*

Dear Director,

A saying attributed to Tertullian says that “the flesh is the pivot of salvation.” This father of the Church was framing a decisive question in terms that were so material as to be downright scandalous to us, having passed, as we have, almost without realizing, from modernity into a hyper-digitized post-modernity. Does the insistence of the Christian tradition on the salvific value of the flesh still make any sense? And if so, why?

In the Feast of the Epiphany recently celebrated, we meet three characters with whom, as a scientific researcher, I have always liked to identify: the Three Kings, men of science who examine nature in search of the truths that can help to resolve the questions of life. Observing the stars, they are led to lower their gaze. Their journey ended before the manger in Bethlehem, where they stopped to adore “a baby.” It is not impertinent to ask ourselves what could possibly have been so extraordinary about a baby. The response for the man of faith is not difficult: in the tiny body of this child, who seeks the gaze of his mother, her embrace, that which becomes visible is the love of God for His creature, a love that is a desire for closeness, intimacy, communion of life. All of this is expressed to all Christians by the arms of the baby Jesus stretched out towards His mother.

The reason that Christianity takes “flesh and blood” interaction so seriously is easy to understand. It has to do with the fact that the human being knows and perceives love through the language of the body. Being human also means this: we are not pure spirits. Nothing can substitute for the flesh, for a gaze, an embrace, a word said in person. God did not call us on the phone to tell us who we are in His eyes.

Setting aside all (justified) considerations of a political and health-related nature, I believe that it is important to not lose sight of the true lesson that the Covid pandemic has taught us: the flesh is not only the pivot of *salvation* for the afterlife, but also, in more secular terms, of earthly health, which the same World Health Organization defines as “mental and social” well-being. The newspapers tell us this. The stories of teachers speak about the difficulty of children, who have suffered the lasting consequences of distance learning. The phenomena of social isolation and psychological suffering have increased dramatically. Research into “smart working” indicates that working remotely has the same efficiency levels as in person working, but this research asks fewer questions about the long term effects of a society that is becoming less material, and more delocalized.

These dynamics were at play well before the pandemic. Already, a few years ago, the Surgeon General of the United States, the health official of the administration, claimed without hesitation that the gravest threat to public health was not cancer or diabetes, but solitude. The studies of the economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton on “deaths of despair” show the links between reduced life expectancy in some segments of the U.S. population and thinning of social ties.

How many times have we repeated, echoing the words of the Pope, that no one is saved alone. Now that vaccines have drastically reduced the mortality of the virus, and we are attempting to imagine a new “normality,” we could add that no one is saved even “remotely.” We still need the carnality of a relationship with others in order to be fully ourselves.

Is Covid, then, only a calamity? I would say no. Perhaps, in the era of the Internet and of the “metaverse” in which we are progressively enclosed, we paradoxically needed something like Covid to give us back the sense of the awesome power that is hidden in the fragility our own hands, in the humility of our faces, and of our lips.

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