

EpilogueA PRIESTLY SPIRITUALITY*A chain made of golden links*

One last word about the priestly spirituality lived through the sacraments of baptism and Holy Eucharist, through the teachings of Benedict XVI and the spiritual experience of Concepcion Cabrera.

We begin with a historical fact in the life of Concepcion Cabrera de Armida. Two days after receiving the central grace in her life, designated with the metaphor “mystical incarnation”, she heard that Jesus asked her to practice a chain of virtues with the goal of uniting herself to the Offering of the *Incarnate Word* to the Eternal Father, through the Holy Spirit, in favor of the Church and the world.

“You will realize – Jesus tells Concepcion – if you have offered every hour with this holy intention, filling them with works pertaining to it.” (AC 22, 203ff: march 27, 1906)

This chain, made of “golden links”, is an exercise of personal perfection through the practice of virtues, but it is not limited to the individual aspect, it also has a community and ecclesial dimension. Concepcion understood it like this: she was only the first link in millions of Christians who would come after, making that chain bigger.

The goal is to configure a priestly people, made of people transformed into priests, in union with the Eternal Priest, who offers for the Church and the world crucified bodies which can form one body and one blood with Jesus. (cf. AC 40, 290: June 1916)

This communal, social and ecclesial dimension can be found in Concepcion, primarily, in what pertains to her own family: when she unites herself to the mystery of Christ Priest and Victim, she does so as mother and wife, including her children in the offering she makes of herself to God¹; therefore, the expression “*this is my body*” reaches beyond her own individuality. Conchita combines her spiritual experience of Christ’s priesthood with her maternal experience.

“You, in saying this is my body, and by virtue of the mystical incarnation, when you offer yourself as host with the Word, must do so with all your children, because you are one with them. Offer the Divine Word for the current ones, and for the future ones, in one only oblation, and especially, for the ones that are most in need” (AC 45, 360: July 6 1925).

¹ “Look: this is the perfection of spiritual maternity, the union of your children with Myself, and the holocaust of them as victims sacrificed by you to the Father, in union with me, for His greater glory and the well being of the world. Your spiritual descendants will be abundant and holy.”

Consequently, the practice of this chain is not enclosed within the person, but has an apostolic projection. This was Mrs. Armida's intention:

I want to fill those blessed hours, hours made of gold, like the Lord says, with the purest acts of love, sacrifices, charity to neighbor and self-emptying, with care and concern for souls...

She offers to Jesus, until her death, the beats of her heart, which only belong to Him: "Let every one of my breaths say 'Jesus, Savior of mankind, save them', all through the day and night" (AC 22, 262: March 28, 1906).

The central objective of this chain of love is to begin a process of transformation into Christ Priest. The specific way of attaining this transformation begins with acknowledging the sense of offering every Christian must live, uniting themselves to the words of Jesus "this is my body, this is my blood". In this way we could make ours the text of the letter to the Hebrews: Father, a body you prepared for me so I can offer it filially, united to your Son Jesus' body. This is my body, I come to do your will (cf. Heb 10:7).

A chain of transformation into Christ

This topic of the chain of virtues, the chain of love, can be excellently illuminated with the teachings of Benedict XVI, he speaks of a chain of transformations, whose first link is the love of Christ expressed at Calvary, where violence became love and death became life.

Jesus contrasts the noisy and ostentatious power of this world with the defenseless power of love, which succumbs to death on the Cross; yet it is this same love which constitutes the new divine intervention that opposes injustice and ushers in the Kingdom of God.²

The last link in this chain is the transformation of the world "so that God may be all in all" (1Cor 15:28). That "God may be all in all" translates, in Concepcion's spirituality, to such a deep and intense presence of God in creation, and in a special way in the human being, that we could talk about a new incarnation of God in history, a "spiritual incarnation".

According to the passage of Hebrews, the entrance of the Son of God in our history starts with Jesus complying with the will of the Father. He says it in the following way: "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me..." (Heb 10:5). Jesus offers His body, that is to say, His person, from the moment of His incarnation. That's where the process begins, or the chain of transformations, which culminates at the cross.

We find this same idea in Concepcion's writings. The chain of love starts with the incarnation of the Word:

² Benedict XVI, *God's Revolution*, 51

“I began this chain with my incarnation and as a reflection of it, in your heart, I want to include you and yours in a special way” (AC 22, 278).

It’s interesting to see the coincidence of the topics between the teachings of Benedict XVI and what Concepcion lives in the practice of the chain of love. Both cases show a mention of living the priesthood of Christ through the expression “this is my body”.

There is but one minor difference. The Pope Emeritus teaches that the central point of the chain of transformations is found in the institution of the Eucharist, on Holy Thursday, with the transformation of bread and wine into the Body of Christ. Specifically, he says:

The process of transformation must now gather momentum. The Body and Blood of Christ are given to us so that we ourselves will be transformed in turn. We are to become the Body of Christ, his own Flesh and Blood. We all eat the one bread, and this means that we ourselves become one.³

We’ve already mentioned that the spiritual experience of Concepcion, the chain of love begins, in her, with the experience of the grace of the mystical incarnation. The chain of love is but a consequence of the grace.

Today we understand that this chain of transformation into Christ begins for all Christians at baptism. It is a process of transformation into Christ, the final goal of living the chain of love. And the Eucharist is immediately related to the first fundamental transformation, performed by Christ at Calvary, transformation of violence into love, of death into life, and they lead to other transformations in human life.

The chain of love, through the practice of the virtues⁴, pretends to effect a true transformation of one’s life. The objective is always the same: the identification with Christ, becoming the body of Christ, like Benedict XVI says, “his blood relatives”. We unite ourselves to Jesus by way of the mystical body and we offer Him and ourselves with Him raising one only cry to heaven: “This is my body”.

This is how Monsignor Martinez expressed this to Concepcion:

Hope in God, that until the end of times, something of yourself, pieces of your soul let us say, shall continue the chain of love you have begun; especially the souls of the Cross must live simplified in love: especially you. Shouldn’t your interior life be an image of the interior life of the Heart of Christ? Shouldn’t it be a chain of love? Remember Our Lord told you that all the links of that chain must be made of gold, that is to say, of love, and that in

³ Benedict XVI, *God’s Revolution*, 58

⁴ The rules of the chain revolve around the main virtues that must be exercised through any spiritual process. Namely: humility, purity, prayer, modesty, poverty, self-denial, total love to Christ and Mary, purity of intention, holiness, love of the cross, surrender to the will of God, faithfulness, to live in Christ.

that purest of golds the various gems, different color and size, the virtues, must be embedded. (AC 56, 71: december 1930).

The presence of the Virgin Mary

We cannot go without the presence of the Virgin Mary in this experience. The Word of God was incarnate in her womb. Let us analyze this point. We mean the topic we already discussed in chapter 9 about the birth of Christ from the Virgin Mary. We will take the topic up again in a different way. The teachings of Benedict XVI show us, in a commentary on the text of Hebrews, how the process of the incarnation is introduced as an intra-divine dialogue: the Son tells the Father: “a body you prepared for me” (Heb 10:5).

This preparation of the body of Christ has been carried out in the body of Mary, from the moment of her fiat. She also was able to say: “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me...I come to do your will”(Heb 10:5-7; Ps 40:6-8).

The body was prepared for the Son, through Mary’s putting herself entirely at the disposal of the Father’s will and thus making her body available as the tabernacle of the Holy Spirit.⁵

For without Mary the entire process of God’s stepping into history would fail of its object... Thus, the woman who described herself as a lowly, that is, a nameless woman, stands beside the living God at the heart of the Creed, and it is inconceivable that she should not. She has an indisputable place in our belief in the living and acting God.⁶

Let us find an analogy. In Conception we can see an image of Mary. Just the way God needed Mary, who offered the totality of her person, and with it her body, to God so it could be the dwelling of God among men, Conception also offers the totality of her person to be invaded by Christ, that is to say, be transformed into Him. The real incarnation required the acceptance of Mary, which was expressed with the words: “I am the handmaid of the Lord”; only this way could the fusion of Word and flesh take place. In the same way, in Conception, her acceptance is expressed with the answer “this is my body, this is my blood”.

Thanks to Mary’s “yes”, we receive the gift of the Eucharist. It was God’s will that thanks to her, the incarnation, redemption, the eucharist and communion have reached us. Mary was the first to receive in her womb the Body and Blood of Christ, she was the first communion in history. Her immaculate heart was the first tabernacle, new and full. Mary is, above all, disciple and priest, who has delivered Jesus to the world. Mary cannot be apart from the Eucharist.

⁵ J. Ratzinger, *God is near us – The Eucharist, the heart of life*, 14

⁶ Cf. J. Ratzinger, *Eucharist*, 13

That's why today, in order to enter into the liturgical action, the best route is to share the feelings and attitudes of Mary Most Holy, "eucharistic woman", who went ahead of and continues going ahead of the Bride Church on the way of faith, calvary, covenant, and new life.

When we apply this to our personal life, Jesus Christ needs our body, that is to say, our person so he can be "mystically incarnated in it", so He can be born in our heart. There must be an acceptance on our part. The practice of the specific virtues proper to the Chain of Love prepares our heart to be open to this encounter with Him.

Back to Concepcion's experience, Monsignor Martinez asks her to be an echo of Jesus' words, that she herself be body and blood of Christ, and the same can be said of all human beings.

Let all of them mystically have one same blood, and so they would be able to exclaim together with Christ and for Christ: "This is my body, this is my blood". This is the celebration of a magnificent Mass, nothing other than the Chain of Love (AC 44,173B)

Concepcion, in imitation of Mary, accepts her spiritual mission towards Jesus and towards all her children...to offer them in union with Christ "to the Father for the world, especially priests... Offer myself and offer them without hesitation. Do you clearly understand now what it means to be a mother?" (AC 46, 35)

And so, every Christian offers his/her life to the Father in the Eucharistic celebration, when we make present the paschal mystery. This offering is what we call chain of love, or chain of transformation into Christ. The conscious participation in the Eucharistic celebration allows Jesus to start effecting in us that change. In the Eucharistic communion it is not Christ who is transformed into our body, but us into Christ. When we take Holy Communion of the body of Christ, we lose ourselves and, united to him, we become one with Him, and through Him, with the community of brothers⁷.

Concepcion was aware of this truth: it was not her who gave life to Christ in the grace of the mystical incarnation. The day when Jesus took possession of her heart, he said: "I am incarnating mystically in your heart, to never separate from it... not you giving life to me, but I to your soul, in a mutual understanding that you wouldn't be able to grasp" (AC 22, 172).

Eucharist, font of transformation

When we speak about the last supper, the one where Jesus offers His body to the Father and gives it to His disciples to eat, we can clearly see the double direction of Christ's priesthood. He offers His life to His Father in heaven, and at the same time, He gives it to us. This takes us, on the one hand, to the contemplative dimension and, on the other hand, to the apostolic or prophetic dimension towards mankind.

⁷ Cf. J. Ratzinger, *Eucharist*, 83

We have already mentioned that the substantial transformation that took place in the cenacle, when Jesus spoke the words over the bread, transforming it into His body, was destined to generate a process of transformations with the ultimate goal of the transformation of the world, until God is all in all (cf. 1Cor 15:28)

Indeed, it is in the Eucharist that we find the Trinitarian love embodied, through the sacramental presence of Christ. The Eucharist is the mystery of faith and Trinitarian love; it is an expression of the love God has for us; it is a gift that the Father who has sent His only Son gives us; a gift of the Son who was incarnate and has offered Himself as a sacrifice on the cross, and a gift of the Holy Spirit who has descended over Mary and who makes the bread and wine holy in the Eucharistic celebration.

Death is transformed into love

Following the doctrine of Benedict XVI, it is a fact that all mankind expects, somehow, a change in their heart, a transformation of the violence which surrounds us into the love that leads us to reconciliation and true friendship. This transformation starts with the death of Christ, because this is the central action capable of truly renewing the world: death is transformed into love.

Since this act transmutes death into love, death as such is conquered from within, the resurrection is already present in it. Death is, so to speak, mortally wounded, so that it can no longer have the last word.

To use an image well known to us today, this is like inducing nuclear fission in the very heart of being – the victory of love over hatred, the victory of love over death. Only this intimate explosion of good conquering evil can then trigger off the series of transformations that little by little will change the world. All other changes remain superficial and cannot save. For this reason we speak of redemption: what had to happen at the most intimate level has indeed happened, and we can enter into its dynamic. Jesus can distribute his Body, because he truly gives himself.⁸

The transformation of the world begins with us ourselves, in our own lives. This is a process that begins existentially with the conscience of the presence of the Trinitarian God in our lives, it helps us open ourselves to the experience of the love of the Father, expressed through the symbols of the heart of the Son and the fire of the Holy Spirit, just like we see them on the Cross of the Apostolate.

Benedict XVI says: “It is not ideologies that save the world, but only a return to the living God, our Creator, the guarantor of our freedom, the guarantor of what is really good and true. True

⁸ Benedict XVI, *God's Revolution*, 58

revolution consists in simply turning to God, who is the measure of what is right and who at the same time is everlasting love. And what could ever save us apart from love?"⁹

To have a happy life it is necessary to have an intimate understanding with God. Only if this relationship is in good working order can the other relationships be fair. Relationships are essential to the human person; but among their multiple relationships there is one which is fundamental: the relationship with God. All other relationships only affect one area of our life; but our relationship with God comes from the deepest part of our being and reaches out to the whole universe. This relationship is fundamental, because it is the one which holds up and conditions all other relationships, its decisive influence reaching all other dimensions of our life.

This is why it is important to learn, throughout our whole life, and from our youth, to think with God, to feel with God, to love with God, in such a way that this is where love is born. In this way love becomes the fundamental element in our life.¹⁰

The happiness we are searching for, the happiness we have a right to taste, has a name and a face: the face of Jesus of Nazareth, hidden in the Eucharist. Only He can give true life to humankind. As we search for happiness, it is the witness of the saints that shows us the way:

The saints and the blessed did not doggedly seek their own happiness, but simply wanted to give themselves, because the light of Christ had shone upon them. They show us the way to attain happiness; they show us how to be truly human.¹¹

A response to God's love

Our response comes from an experience that God triggered in our souls. To this respect, Conchita's words touch the essential elements of the journey which takes us to that experience:

The mystical incarnation puts the soul in an intimate contact with the three Divine persons. In Them and in Mary I must fuse my life, and not only in the spiritual life, but also the material life, fusing it, moreover, in the Offering of the Word to the Father.

I must, within that same offering, eat, sleep, feel joy, suffer; all my life must be simplified in the constant offering for the glory of the Most Holy Trinity. All my life, in union with Mary, without leaving Mary, imitating her in her love for Jesus, in her total submission to the Father, and letting herself be moved only by the Holy Spirit. (AC 46, 93-94; October 27, 1925)

⁹ Benedict XVI, *God's Revolution*, 54

¹⁰ J.Ratzinger, *To look on Christ*, (115f in the Spanish edition)

¹¹ Benedict XVI, *God's Revolution*, 53

Conchita makes reference to the topics of the Trinity, Mary, the priesthood, and the latter understood as the offering of the Word and of ordinary life, obedience to the Father, and the motions of the Holy Spirit.

To become aware of God's action in our life leads us to search for a profound experience of Him, to be aware of the presence of the Trinitarian God in our soul, of the dwelling of the Three Divine Persons in our heart. This is what Paul teaches us through the Letter to the Ephesians: (2:22) "In Christ you also are being built together into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit". The better we live this divine life, the more we will reflect the mystery of the life of the Father, the more it shines in us the truth of the Son, the more we show the love of the Holy Spirit¹².

Prophetic projection

Whoever has found Christ must bring others to Him. A great joy cannot be kept to oneself. It is necessary to pass it along. In many parts around the world there is today a strange forgetfulness of God. It seems as if everything can work just the same without Him. But at the same time there is a generalized feeling of frustration and dissatisfaction about everything and in everybody.

And so an apostolic commitment is born within us: to help others to find the true star which shows the way: Jesus Christ! Let us ourselves strive to know Him better all the time so we can too guide, in a convincing manner, others to Him. This is the reason it is so important to have love for Sacred Scripture, in it we find the true face of God, manifested in the person of Jesus Christ; its company gives us comfort and strength. In Scriptures we find words of light which respond to the big challenges of life and provide a clear indication of the way we need to take.

Consequently, we must deepen our knowledge of the faith of the Church, which helps us to make sense out of Scriptures. It is the Holy Spirit who guides the Church in their growing faith, and has always, and is still helping it reach into the depths of truth (Cf Jn 16:13).

All this we experience in the Eucharistic celebration. "(for) we, though many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf", says St Paul (1Cor 10:17). With this he is trying to convey that since we all receive the same Lord and He receives us and draws us to Himself, thus we need to be one thing amongst ourselves.

This must show in our lives, in our capacity to forgive, in our sensibility to the needs of others, in our availability to share, in the commitment to our neighbor – both the close and the far. We mustn't, for example, abandon the elderly in their loneliness, or walk by people who suffer.

If we think and live in virtue of the communion with Christ, then our eyes are opened. In the future, we can't settle with living our lives concerned only with ourselves, we need instead to be on the lookout for where we are needed and who needs us. Living and acting by this rule we shall

¹² Cf. L. Boff, *The Trinity, society and freedom*, (272 in the Spanish edition)

realize that it is far more beautiful to be useful and be available to people around us than worry only about the comforts offered to us.

Let us draw again from Benedict XVI's doctrine, this time as he expresses it in his first encyclical "Deus Caritas Est".

The direct duty to work for a just ordering of society, on the other hand, is proper to the lay faithful. As citizens of the State, they are called to take part in public life in a personal capacity. So they cannot relinquish their participation "in the many different economic, social, legislative, administrative and cultural areas, which are intended to promote organically and institutionally the *common good*." The mission of the lay faithful is therefore to configure social life correctly, respecting its legitimate autonomy and cooperating with other citizens according to their respective competences and fulfilling their own responsibility.

it still remains true that charity must animate the entire lives of the lay faithful and therefore also their political activity, lived as "social charity".[...] there will never be a situation where the charity of each individual Christian is unnecessary, because in addition to justice man needs, and will always need, love¹³.

To conclude, in light of the thoughts of Benedict XVI we are able to discover in what ways the Chain of love, an offering of our lives to the Father, is a chain of transformations, which begins in the very person of Jesus Christ with His entering into our history, offering His "body" to the Father. This is reflected in the Christian spirituality in the experience of the priesthood of Christ: we, united to Jesus Christ, offer our lives.

This is how we want to oppose a culture of death which appears in drugs, in the escape from reality to the illusory, a false happiness expressed through lies, fraud, injustice, contempt for others, and lack of solidarity and responsibility toward the poor and suffering. All this shows through in a sexuality that turns into pure enjoyment without responsibility, into an objectifying of the human being, who should already be considered a person, worthy of a personal love that requires fidelity, but becomes merchandise, just an object.

On the other hand, we want to say a great "yes" to life. This is our "Yes" to Christ, the "yes" to the defeater of death and the "yes" to life here and in eternity.

Jesus, Savior of mankind, Save them!

¹³ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 29