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As one of the original centers of new monasticism in Europe, with important links to ancient monastic ways, the Bose Community currently includes eighty vowed brothers and sisters of various Christian traditions, and receives thousands of visitors annually.

ENZO BIANCHI

ECHOES
of the
WORD

A New Kind of Monk on the Meaning of Life



Foreword by Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove



PARACLETE PRESS
BREWSTER, MASSACHUSETTS

2013 First Printing This Edition

Echoes of the Word: A New Kind of Monk on the Meaning of Life

ISBN 978-1-61261-373-4

Translated by Christine Landau.

First published in Great Britain in 2002 by Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge,
36 Causton Street, London SW1P 4ST, www.spckpublishing.co.uk

Original Italian version published in 1999 as *Le parole della spiritualità: Per un lessico della vita interiore* by Rizzoli. Second edition published 2012. Copyright © Enzo Bianchi 2002, 2012

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This edition published by Paraclete Press, Brewster, Massachusetts, www.paracletepress.com.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bianchi, Enzo.

[*Parole della spiritualità*. English]

Echoes of the word : a new kind of monk on the meaning of life / Enzo Bianchi ; foreword by Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-61261-373-4 (trade pbk.)

1. Meditations. I. Title.

BV4832.3.B5313 2013

242—dc23

2013024327

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Published by Paraclete Press

Brewster, Massachusetts

www.paracletepress.com

Printed in the United States of America

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FOREWORD

Some years ago, when I was visiting my spiritual director at a Benedictine monastery, he said to me over lunch, "Are you busy tomorrow afternoon? I'd like you to meet my spiritual director." It turned out she was a Benedictine sister in her mid 90s who'd spent 30 years of her life as a hermit. I wasn't sure what to expect, but I trusted my director. He drove me to the care facility where this sister's community was helping her through her last years. We sat at a small circular table with three chairs and talked for an hour. Then my director and I got back in his car and returned to the monastery.

It was as simple as that, really. But that one hour from so many years ago sticks out in my memory as one of the times when I have felt the presence of God most clearly. It's also an experience that continues to make me long for a spiritual life that taps into the deep wells of God's mercy.

When I returned home from the monastery, I wrote a note to this amma whose aliveness to God had so inspired me. I wanted to thank her for taking the time to share with me. Several weeks later, I got a note back from one of her sisters. In the week or so between our visit and my letter, she had died. But she had, just days before, been so alive—so present to me in every way. What was it this dear woman had that so few people seem to have in

our time? How might we connect to the source of all life as she did—living so fully, right up to the end of our lives?

These are the questions that sent thousands of people to the Egyptian desert in the 5th century, asking the ammas and abbas there for a “word.” They are, I suspect, the questions that drive our contemporary interests in spirituality, self-help, and wholistic well-being. They are the questions that make people like you and me want to read a book like this one.

But here’s the trouble: it’s hard to find a book today that claims any real authority to address these questions. Yes, we have thousands of books on spirituality. If you’ve found your way to this one, I imagine you’ve read several of them.

But this one is different. This is what I most want to say about Enzo Bianchi’s fine book. Yes, it’s full of wonderful insights. It draws on a great tradition and condenses its wisdom in ways that both surprised and delighted me. It is succinct (which I always appreciate), but also thorough. I could go on.

But what I really want to say is that this is a different kind of spiritual book. It is not the travel journal of a fellow pilgrim, offering thoughts along the way. It’s not an enthusiastic promotional for a spiritual practice recently rediscovered. It’s not the authoritative tome by the leading scholar in any field.

No, it is different. The best way I know to say it is that reading this book has felt to me like visiting with that dear amma just days before her death. I feel like I’m listening to someone who knows me in my inner most parts. I feel like I’m in the presence of someone who’s really alive. And it makes me want to go deeper—to tap into the same living water from which this abba drinks.

This is a book that has made me want to be more holy. It's that simple, really. But I can't imagine anything more important in the whole world.

Jonatban Wilson-Hartgrove
Ordinary Time, 2013

INTRODUCTION

A *bba*, give me a word!" At the beginning of the fourth century, as Christianity was gradually becoming the official religion of the Roman Empire and permeating the customs of the pagan society of the time, this sentence in its disconcerting simplicity was beginning to resound more and more frequently in the deserts of Egypt and Palestine, Syria, and Persia. Passing visitors to monasteries or young monks often addressed an "elder" in this way, asking for a word of instruction that, generated by the other's experience of life in the Spirit, would help them walk in the footsteps of the Lord: *a word for life* drawn from and thus able to give meaning to everyday life, a word originating outside of themselves but able to descend into the heart, an exterior event capable of giving direction to the listener's inner life. Passed on by word of mouth, welcomed in the heart of the listener, meditated on, and put into practice, these words, *echoes of the Word*, soon took the form of a "lexicon of the desert." By naming the realities of the Spirit, they provided spirituality with its own vocabulary—and giving a name means taking a first step toward knowing what one names, toward acquiring and making one's own an awareness that goes beyond the name given. Within a short time collections of "sayings and

deeds of the Desert Fathers" appeared, composed to allow these pearls of wisdom to reach a wider audience, to compensate for the inevitable scarcity, with the passing of time, of genuine spiritual "fathers," and to help counter the resulting decline in the quality of Christian life. Those who assembled these anthologies were well aware of their own limitations—in fact, it was this awareness that inspired their desire to communicate messages that would surpass those limitations. They were also aware of the risks their work involved: "The prophets wrote books, the fathers used these books as inspiration for their actions, their successors learned them by heart, our generation copied them on papyrus and parchment and put them away on shelves to gather dust." In one way or another, though, the transmission of ideas took place. Later generations asked questions and found answers, perhaps not directly from an *abba* but from the lines of a manuscript read or copied, or in the context of a community *collatio* or discussion in which ideas were exchanged. In such moments of community dialogue, each person is at the same time *abba* and disciple of the others, on the one condition that he or she speaks and acts with authenticity.

In the following pages, I have sought to make myself an intermediary in this uninterrupted process of transmission. The origin of these pages is similar to the origin of the much more authoritative written anthologies of early Christianity. These pages were written in response to requests from brothers, sisters, and guests of my community, and I have arranged them in book form with the intention of opening this dialogue to a wider but equally interested audience, both within and, more frequently, outside of the church. The most famous early anthologies of sayings were arranged in "alphabetical"

order (according to the *abba's* name) or "systematically" (according to subject), but I have chosen here to use a method of allusions and cross-references in which one term evokes another, explains it in part, and sets aside other elements of the definition to be taken up further on. This method has a long history: it has generated an infinite variety of dictionaries and lexicons, beginning with biblical concordances, and it continues to be the model according to which entries are arranged in modern encyclopedias, even if the order of the entries is strictly alphabetical. It is a method that has found a perhaps unexpected but strikingly current expression in online navigation: what are the celebrated countless Internet "links" if not the fruit of thought associations, of mental connections that have become network connections?

In these pages, then, I have sought to let myself be guided by the biblical and patristic tradition that has preceded and formed me in responding to the requests of those who continue to ask me, with sincerity and passion, for "a reason for my hope" (see 1 Pet. 3:15). In this nonlinear but always directed journey, the reader will at times find him- or herself returning to terrain already traveled, but each time a different perspective is revealed, the point of view changes, a different choice is made at the crossroads. At some "sites" I have paused only briefly, trusting that the topic's richness would emerge with a few key words. At other points—as in the case of prayer, for example—I chose to linger, using different approaches in an attempt to draw as near as possible to the unreachable goal of complete understanding, like a butterfly that dances around a flame but truly understands it only by throwing itself into the fire. This approach is the price I felt it necessary to pay in my efforts

to remain open to the guidance of the Spirit, attentive to the newness that makes itself present in our lives, and to the otherness that overturns our carefully made plans. There is a constant that has accompanied me in this journey in Christian spirituality, and it is the conviction that our life has a meaning and that it is not our task to invent it or determine it, but simply to discover it present and active in us and around us. Once we have recognized it, we are given the freedom to welcome it.

ECHOES
of the
WORD



SPIRITUAL LIFE

Christian life is impossible without spiritual life! The fundamental responsibility entrusted to the church is that of leading its faithful to an experience of God, a life lived in relationship with God. It is essential today to repeat these basic truths, because we live in a time in which the life of the church, dominated by pastoral concerns, has come to reflect the idea that the experience of faith is based on social involvement rather than on the discovery of a personal relationship with God lived in a community context, rooted in attentive listening to the Word of God contained in Scripture, formed by the Eucharist, and expressed in a life of faith, hope, and love. Reducing the Christian experience to its ethical dimension is the quickest and most direct way to empty faith of its meaning.

Faith leads us to a *genuine experience* of God: in other words, it introduces us to spiritual life, which is life guided by the Holy Spirit. Anyone who believes in God also needs to experience God; correct ideas about God are not enough. The experience of God, which always takes place in a context of faith and not sight (see 2 Cor. 5:7: "We walk by faith, not by sight"), is an experience whose authenticity startles us. We find ourselves repeating with Jacob, "The Lord is in this place—and I did not

know it!" (Gen. 28:16), or with the Psalmist, "You hem me in, behind and before. . . . Where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there" (Ps. 139:5, 7–8). At other times our spiritual experience is marked by emptiness, by the silence of God, by an aridity that leads us to repeat Job's words: "If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him; on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him" (Job 23:8–9). Yet even in the silence of daily life God can speak to us. He acts in our life through the experiences life offers us, and this means that he also acts in our times of crisis, in the moments of darkness and confusion in which we find ourselves.

The spiritual experience is above all the experience of *being preceded*: it is God who goes before us, searches for us, and calls us. We do not invent the God with whom we want to enter into relationship—he is already there! The experience of God is necessarily mediated by Christ: "No one comes to the Father except through me," says Jesus (John 14:6). The spiritual experience is also the experience of *discovering that we are children of God*. The Holy Spirit is the light with which God lights our path and directs us toward sanctification, and on this path we follow the Son. The spiritual experience becomes nothing other than our response in faith, hope, and love to God the Father, who addresses to each of us, in baptism, the words that reveal our identity: "You are my son," or "You are my daughter." Sons and daughters in Jesus Christ the Son: this is the promise and the path revealed to us in baptism! In the words of Irenaeus of Lyons, the Spirit and the Son are

like the two hands with which God shapes our life into a life of freedom in obedience, of relationship and communion with him and with one another.

The authenticity of the spiritual journey depends on several essential elements. The *crisis of our self-image* is the painful but necessary beginning of conversion in which our unreal, idealized "I," the "I" that we have built for ourselves and that we were convinced we needed to develop in our search for self-fulfillment, is shattered. Without this "crisis" we do not arrive at true life according to the Spirit. If we do not die to ourselves we cannot be reborn to the new life offered to us in baptism (see Rom. 6:4). The authenticity of the spiritual journey also depends on honesty toward reality and faithfulness to reality—in other words, adherence to reality—because it is *within* history and *within* daily life, *with* others and not without them, that we come to know God and grow in our relationship with him. It is here that our spiritual life can harmonize obedience to God and faithfulness to the earth in a life of faith, hope, and love. It is here that we can say our "yes" to the God who calls us with the gifts and limitations that characterize our identity as created beings. We are then able to set out on a journey of faith, following in the footsteps of Christ, that will lead us to the experience of Christ dwelling in us. Paul writes to the Christians of Corinth, "Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith. . . . Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you?" (2 Cor. 13:5).

The spiritual life unfolds in our "heart," our inmost self, where our desires and decisions take shape. It is here that we should be able to recognize the authenticity of our Christian identity. Our

life as Christians is not about going “beyond” or “further,” always in search of something new, but rather about going in *depth* and discovering that our heart is the Holy of Holies, the sanctuary of the temple of God that is our body. We discover the meaning of the words “Sanctify the Lord in your hearts” (see 1 Pet. 3:15). It is in our heart that our sanctification—our welcoming the divine life of the Trinity within us—takes place: “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them” (John 14:23). The goal of the spiritual life is our participation in the life of God, which the church fathers called “divinization.” “God became man so that man could become God,” writes Gregory Nazianzen, and in the writings of Maximus the Confessor we find the following sublime summary: “Our divinization takes place when divine love comes to dwell within us, to the point that we forgive our enemies as Christ did on the cross. When is it that you become God? When you are able, like Christ on the cross, to say, ‘Father, forgive them,’ or even, ‘Father, I give my life for them.’” This is the point to which we are led in the spiritual life, a life rooted in faith in God our Father and Creator, set in motion and guided by the Spirit who sanctifies, and lived in communion with the Son who redeems us and teaches us to love as he loved us. It is here that we measure our growth to the full stature of Christ.

ASCETICISM

We are not born Christians, we become Christians” (Tertullian). This “becoming” is the space in which Christian asceticism reveals its meaning. The word *asceticism* is suspect today, if not completely absurd—and incomprehensible for many people, including—and this is particularly significant—quite a few Christians. Derived from the Greek verb *askein* (to train or practice), the term *asceticism* indicates a form of methodical training, a repeated exercise, an effort directed toward the acquisition of a specific ability or area of competence. We might think of an athlete, an artist, or a soldier—each trains by repeating over and over the same movements or gestures in order to reach a high level of performance. Asceticism, therefore, is first of all a human necessity, because our growth and “humanization” includes a dimension of interior growth that should correspond to our physical development. We need to know how to say no if we want to be able to say yes: “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways,” writes St. Paul (1 Cor. 13:11). In Christian life, which is rebirth to a new life in Christ and the adaptation of our own life to God’s life, we need to learn “unnatural” capacities such as prayer and love for our enemies—and this is impossible without practice and constant

effort. Unfortunately, the current cultural myth of spontaneity and permanent adolescence, which sees effort and authenticity as opposed to one another, is a serious obstacle to human maturation and makes it difficult for us to understand why asceticism is essential to spiritual growth.

Of course, it should be said clearly that Christian asceticism always remains *a means directed toward an end*, toward the only goal we can pursue in the spiritual life: *love* for God and our neighbor. It is impossible to practice asceticism without encountering setbacks, failure, and sin, and this helps us realize that Christian asceticism, understood correctly, is always inseparable from grace: "It is not possible to triumph over one's own nature," writes John Climacus. In Christian history there have been numerous exaggerations in ascetic practice, and such excesses have at times threatened to reduce Christian life to a series of heroic feats. At the same time, though, Christians have always spoken out against these excesses, often with a sense of humor: "If you fast regularly, do not be inflated with pride; if you think highly of yourself because of it, then you had better eat meat. It is better for a man to eat meat than to be inflated with pride and glorify himself" (Isidore the Elder). In Christian life, asceticism is not about personal perfection but about growing in freedom and in our relationships with others—the goal is always love. Asceticism takes seriously the fact that we cannot serve two masters, and that the alternative to obeying God is serving idols. We need to "educate" our inner life, refine and purify our love, and continue to make our relationships more intelligent and respectful—this is what asceticism tells us! The "sweat and struggle" (Cabasilas) of our ascetic efforts

open us to the gift of God and help us prepare our entire being, our entire existence, to receive the gift of grace. We can summarize the Christian dimension of asceticism in this affirmation: salvation comes from God in Jesus Christ. Asceticism means nothing more than accepting the fact that we are who we are only because of the grace of that Other in our lives named God. It means, in other words, agreeing to receive our identity in our relationship with this Other. Physical asceticism, which has often been viewed in purely negative terms and associated with disdain for the body, especially following the widespread acceptance of a dualistic anthropological model, actually tells us that our experience of God necessarily involves our entire body! Without this dimension, Christianity is reduced either to an intellectual exercise—that is, to gnosis—or to its moral dimension alone.

Asceticism is at the service of the Christian revelation that attests that our true freedom is revealed when we are open to the gift of God and capable of giving ourselves for love of God and our neighbor. Our ascetic discipline has the effect of liberating us from *philautia* ("self-love, egocentrism") and transforming us from individuals into people capable of communion, love, and the free gift of ourselves. Again, the words of a Desert Father reveal that the early Christian tradition recognized its own errors: "Many have prostrated themselves without the slightest discernment, and have left without gaining anything at all. Our mouths smell bad because of our fasting, we know the Scriptures by heart, we recite all of the Psalms, but we do not have what God seeks—love and humility." We need to be intelligent and discerning in our asceticism if we want to please God, and if we want to become more, and not less,

human. An intelligent asceticism can help us in our task of making our life a masterpiece, a work of art. Perhaps it is not by chance that the verb *askein*, in ancient Greek literature, is also used to designate the work of the artist. This, then, is the goal of asceticism: to situate the life of the Christian in the domain of beauty, which in Christianity is another name for holiness.

HOLINESS AND BEAUTY

The Christian tradition, especially in the West, has interpreted holiness in essentially moral terms. Understood in these terms, holiness does not imply absence of sin, but rather trust in the mercy of God, which is stronger than our sins and able to lift up the believer who has fallen. The holy person is a song sung in thanksgiving for the mercy of God. He or she gives witness to the victory of God three times holy and three times merciful. Holiness is grace; it is a gift, and what is asked of each of us is the fundamental openness that will allow us to be flooded by the divine gift. What holiness tells us above all is that our Christian existence has a responsorial nature—and our response affirms the primacy of who we are over what we do, giving over accomplishing, freedom over legalism. We can say that the nature of Christian holiness, even in its ethical dimension, is not legalistic or juridical, but Eucharistic. It is a response to the *charis* (grace) of God manifested in Jesus Christ, and because of this it is marked by gratitude and joy. The holy person, the saint, is the one who says to God, "Not I, you."

If we think of holiness from the point of view of grace freely offered, we can give it another name: beauty. Yes, in the eyes of the Christian, holiness is also beauty. The New Testament already

makes this association: in the First Letter of Peter, the “holy conduct” to which Christians are called is also described as “beautiful [or “good”—Greek *kalos*] conduct” (see 1 Pet. 1:15 and 2:12). Seen as beauty, holiness is no longer an individual effort, the result of a (perhaps heroic) personal struggle, but an event of communion. It is the communion represented in the iconlike image of Moses and Elijah “in glory” (Lk. 9:31) and of the disciples Peter, James, and John gathered around Christ radiant in the light of the Transfiguration. It is the *communio sanctorum*, the communion of saints—in other words, the communion of those who participate in the life of God *communicantes in Unum*, living in communion with the One who is the only source of holiness (see Heb. 2:11). How can we forget the cathedral of Chartres, with its statues representing the holy men and women of the Old and New Testaments gathered around God like countless rays sent forth by the one sun? The glory of the One who is “the author of beauty” shines on the face of Jesus (2 Cor. 4:6), the Messiah celebrated by the psalmist as “the most beautiful of the sons of men” (Ps. 45:3). This glory is poured forth into the heart of the Christian by the Holy Spirit, who transforms our face into the image and likeness of the face of Christ and our biological individualities into events of relationship and communion. In this way we as Christians come to know something of the beauty of the divine life of the Trinity, a life that is communion, a *perichoresis* of love.

Holiness is the beauty that challenges the ugliness of being closed in on ourselves, of egocentrism, and of *philautia* (self-love). It is the joy that challenges the sadness of those who do not open themselves to the gift of love, like the rich young man of the

Gospel who "went away grieving" (Matt. 19:22). As Léon Bloy has written, "The only sadness is not being holy" (Bloy 1956). This is the holiness, and the beauty, offered to every Christian both as a gift and as a responsibility. In a world called "beautiful" at its creation in the Genesis account (the Hebrew *tor* means both "good" and "beautiful"), men and women are created by God in a relationship of sexual alterity and are made suitable partners for God, capable of receiving the gifts of his love, and this work of creation is praised as "very beautiful" (Gen. 1:31). In a world called to beauty, we who have been given responsibility for creation are also responsible for the beauty of the world, of our own lives, and of each other's lives. If beauty is "a promise of happiness" (Stendhal), every gesture, every word, and every action inspired by beauty is a prophecy of the redeemed world, of the new heavens and new earth, of all humanity reunited in the heavenly Jerusalem in endless communion. Beauty becomes a prophecy of salvation. "It is beauty," Dostoevsky wrote, "that will save the world."

Christians, called to holiness, are also called to beauty, and so we can ask ourselves this question: how have we answered the call to protect beauty, create it, and live in it? There is a beauty that we are called to create in our relationships, a beauty that is capable of making the church a community in which true relationships, based on freedom, mercy, and forgiveness, are possible. In such a community no one can say to another member, "I have no need of you" (1 Cor. 12:21), because every time the communion of the church is damaged, the beauty of the one body of Christ is disfigured. This beauty that we create through our relationships should be capable of making the church a place that is filled with light (see

Matt. 5:14–16), a place of freedom and not of fear, of full expression—and not restriction—of all that is human, of understanding and not opposition, and of sharing and solidarity, especially with the poorest of the poor. It is a beauty that should pervade our living spaces, the liturgy, our physical surroundings, and especially the living temple of God that is each human being. It is the beauty that emerges from simplicity, poverty, and the struggle against idolatry and worldliness. It shines forth where communion triumphs over consumerism, and where contemplation and the free gift of oneself are victorious over possessiveness and greed. Yes, Christianity with *philocalia*, love of beauty, and concealed within the Christian vocation to holiness is a vocation to beauty, an invitation to make our life a work of art, a masterpiece of love. The command “You shall be holy, for I, the Lord, am holy” (Lev. 19:2; 1 Pet. 1:16) is inseparable from the command, “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another” (John 13:34). Christian beauty is not an object but an event. It is an event of love that narrates again and again in history, creatively and poetically, the folly and tragic beauty of the love with which God has loved us by giving us his Son, Jesus Christ.

SENSES AND SPIRIT

The integration of the sensory dimension in the spiritual experience seems problematic today. Does the expression "experience of God" still hold meaning for us? Or must we resign ourselves to letting this experience be diluted to its purely intellectual dimension (speaking or writing about God), reduced to charitable and philanthropic activity (the "experience of God" as altruism), or considered the exclusive privilege of the world of mysticism? We do draw near to God in faith, and not by sight, but we encounter God with our entire self, including our body and senses. Augustine proclaims this: "You called, shouted, broke through my deafness; you flared, blazed, banished my blindness; you lavished your fragrance, I gasped, and now I pant for you; I tasted you, and I hunger and thirst; you touched me, and I burned for your peace" (*Confessions* 10.27.38). Augustine's text echoes the doctrine of the "spiritual senses," first formulated by Origen in the third century. The Alexandrian monk writes:

Christ becomes the object of each of the soul's senses. He calls himself the true "light" that illuminates the eyes of the soul, the "Word" we hear, the "bread" of life we taste. Similarly, he is called "oil" and "nard" so that the soul can delight in the

fragrance of the Logos, and he became the Word made flesh, tangible and accessible to the touch, so that our inner being can grasp the Word of life. (*Commentary on the Song of Songs* 2.167.25)

In becoming human, God affirmed once and for all the body's eminent spiritual dignity. It is true that the traditional doctrine of the spiritual senses sometimes presupposes a fundamental opposition and division between corporeal and spiritual senses, but in certain versions of the doctrine (in St. Bonaventure, for instance) we perceive the continuity between the two levels of senses. In any case, it is essential that we look beyond the anthropological perspectives, impracticable today, on which the earliest doctrinal formulations were based, and that we retrieve and reformulate the profound spiritual message they were intended to convey. *Sensus fidei*, insight into matters of faith, is grounded not in doctrinal knowledge but in life experience and in a "practical" knowledge of God that allows us to arrive at an "understanding of divine things"—in other words, discernment.

We develop this spiritual discernment above all during the Eucharistic liturgy, where the mystery that is celebrated is the mystery of faith—yet the liturgy is also an experience that involves all of the believer's senses. Those who participate *listen* to the Word of God proclaimed, see icons, candles, and the faces of those around them, *taste* the Eucharistic bread and wine, *smell* incense, and *touch* their neighbors as they exchange the sign of peace. The revelation of the Incarnation enters the human person through all of his or her senses, and in the sacramental economy, the celebration of this mystery involves all of the senses, but requires that they be refined

and transfigured so that we can perceive all of reality “in Christ.” The senses are not eliminated but ordered by faith, trained in prayer, grafted in Christ, and transfigured by the Holy Spirit. The baptized person thus reveals his or her identity as a new creature who truly “sees’ the Son of God, ‘hears’ and ‘listens to’ his word, ‘touches’ him and is nourished by him, ‘tastes’ him, and breathes life in the Holy Spirit” (Mollat 1974, 231–32). This is how the biblical scholar Donatien Mollat describes the emergence of the spiritual senses in the fourth Gospel. Let us not make the mistake of thinking that this is a “mystical” experience inaccessible to most people. “Listening” to the Word of God during prayerful reading of Scripture leads the believer to “see” the face of Christ and “touch” him in his nearness, “taste” the consolation of the Spirit and shed tears—this is the extreme concreteness of the spiritual experience.

The experience of faith is an experience of beauty, an encounter as real as it is indescribable, an awareness of a presence that is closer to us than our inmost self. And this experience invests the body and the senses. In the Christian East, a holy person is said to have a luminous face and a body that emanates fragrance—his corporeality has become an event of beauty and communion. We should take care, of course, not to confuse the psychological and the emotional with the spiritual, but the spiritual is present in the psychological and invests the body’s senses. The “spiritual senses,” then, are not simply metaphors, but suggest the different aspects of communion with the Lord that can be revealed to the human mind: gentleness, strength, intimacy, passionate attachment, obedience, the intensity of a presence. This is *sobria ebrietas* (sober drunkenness), the experience of love. When Augustine says that the eye

sees “from the heart” and that only love is capable of seeing, he suggests that the spiritual senses are the body’s senses permeated by the profound experience of the love of God, a love that purifies, orders, and grants intelligence to human love.

But who today is capable of offering an initiation in “the spiritual life of the body, in a world that, by confusing or separating body and spirit, has lost both and is gradually dying as a result of this loss”? (Cristina Campo 1987).

VIGILANCE

All we need is a vigilant spirit.” This apophthegm of Abba Poemen, a Desert Father, is a strong statement of the centrality of vigilance in Christian spiritual life. In what does it consist? In the New Testament, vigilance is contrasted with drunkenness or drowsiness and defined as the sobriety of those who have a clearly defined goal to pursue and who “keep their eyes open,” knowing that if they are not vigilant they may be distracted from their goal. And since the goal to be pursued, for a Christian, is a relationship with God in Jesus Christ, Christian vigilance is completely oriented toward the person of Christ, who has come and who will come again. Basil of Caesarea writes, in the conclusion of his *Moral Rules*, that the Christian’s specific identity consists in this vigilance directed toward Christ: “What is it that defines the Christian? Keeping watch every day and hour and being ready to carry out perfectly what pleases God, in the knowledge that the Lord will come at an hour we do not expect.” Basil’s emphasis on the temporal dimension of vigilance is significant. A type of the vigilant man or woman is the prophet, who translates the gaze and the Word of God into the “today” of time and history. Vigilance is inner lucidity, intelligence, the ability to think critically, awareness of and involvement in the

world in which one lives, and freedom from distraction and dissipation. The vigilant person, who has achieved unification by listening to the Word of God and remaining inwardly attentive to the demands of the Word, becomes *responsible*—in other words, radically *not* indifferent, aware of the need to pay attention to his or her surroundings, and in particular, capable of watching over others and taking care of them. “Being an *episcopus* [bishop],” writes Martin Luther, “means looking, being vigilant, keeping careful watch.” Vigilance is a quality that demands a great deal of inner strength and, in turn, produces equilibrium: we are asked to be watchful not only with regard to history, the world in which we live, and those around us, but also with regard to ourselves, our own ministry, our work, our personal conduct, and the entire sphere of our relationships. Our vigilance allows Christ to reign as Lord in every aspect of our lives.

This is exactly why vigilance is so difficult: we are asked, first and foremost, to be watchful with regard to ourselves. The Christian’s enemy is within, and not outside, him or her. “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life. . . . Be alert at all times and pray,” Jesus says in the Gospel of Luke (21:34–36). The price of vigilance is this struggle against ourselves, and those who are vigilant are also resistant. Watchfulness means fighting to defend our inner life, to avoid being distracted by worldly seductions or overcome by life’s anxieties, to create unity between our faith and our life, and to maintain balance and harmony in our life. Being vigilant also means adhering to reality instead of using one’s imagination as an escape or seeking refuge in idolatry. It means working and avoiding

laziness, interacting with others, loving and refusing indifference, and fulfilling one's personal and social commitments in expectation of the coming kingdom of God.

The quality of our life and our relationships depends on our vigilance, which leads us toward fullness of life and helps us fight against the allure of death. Paul tells the Christians of Thessalonica, "Let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober" (1 Thess. 5:6). According to biblical symbolism, and in other cultures as well (in Greek mythology, for instance, *Hypnos*, Sleep, and *Thanatos*, Death, are twins), falling asleep means entering the realm of death. Vigilance, on the other hand, is an attitude that characterizes anyone who is attentive and responsible, but it acquires particular significance for the Christian who places his or her faith in Christ, who died and is risen. At the heart of the Christian's vigilance is his or her profound and intimate certainty of the victory of life over death. Those who are vigilant—as opposed to those who are asleep or numb, who dull their inner senses, and who remain on the surface of events and relationships—become fully alert, and they also become men and women of light who are capable of radiating the light that is in them. Christians, "illuminated" through their baptismal immersion, are "children of light" and are called to let their light illuminate others: "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). This outpouring of light has nothing to do with spiritual exhibitionism: it happens of its own accord when the light that dwells in a vigilant heart, which cannot remain hidden, overflows and streams forth. In a certain sense, vigilance is the only thing that is absolutely essential

in Christian life: it is the source of every virtue, the salt that flavors all of our actions, and the light by which we think and speak. Without vigilance, we run the risk of seeing all of our activity come to nothing. Abba Arsenius said, "Everyone must be watchful of his actions, lest he labor in vain."