

**SOME REFLECTIONS  
AT ARRIVING AT THE NOON OF LIFE  
(1/4)**

**Brother Rodolfo Andaur (1)**

*O Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger,  
or discipline me in your wrath.  
Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am languishing;  
O Lord, heal me, for my bones are shaking with terror.  
My soul also is struck with terror,  
while you, O Lord - how long?*

*Turn, O Lord, save my life;  
deliver me for the sake of your steadfast love.  
For in death there is no remembrance of you;  
in Sheol who can give you praise?*

*I am weary with my moaning;  
every night I flood my bed with tears;  
I drench my couch with my weeping.  
My eyes waste away because of grief;  
they grow weak because of all my foes (2).*

If you are between the ages of 35 and 55 and you are aware of a new emotion; that everything you did up until now is becoming dull and makes you feel empty, worn out, restless; if you do not find yourself satisfied with what you have done but you do not know what to do; if before you felt strength and security in your spiritual life but today you are surrounded by a feeling of failure; if you feel surrounded by external forces, you feel abandoned by God, deceived. Then, friend, it is possible that you are entering a new crisis in your life that has a major spiritual component to it: this is the crisis of midlife. Since I find myself experiencing this, some of my brothers in religion gave me a book dealing with the topic. And since I found it to be very interesting I reflected on this book since it may serve as a support to keep in focus what may come later. Perhaps sharing this reflection that I made in a retreat setting with you might prove to be useful.

The first question that struck me was: Have others experienced this moment with such intensity? Does this life crisis really exist? Experience says yes, crises do exist. We have felt some of these on our life journey. I have heard many speak about the most difficult of these being approaching the age of forty. Why do some abandon where they are or who they are with at this time? Some change their religious state, some leave their wives, abandon families while trying to prove themselves in matters that they have never done before...and the list could go on. Why is this urge so strong, vital and lasting? Is this what the psalmist felt when he wrote that heartbreaking cry that seems to have no answer?

*For my soul is full of troubles,  
and my life draws near to Sheol.*

*You have put me in the depths of the Pit,  
in the regions dark and deep.*

*You have caused my companions to shun me;  
you have made me a thing of horror to them.  
I am shut in so that I cannot escape;  
my eye grows dim through sorrow.*

*You have caused friend and neighbor to shun me;  
my companions are in darkness. (3)*

There are many reasons that we choose a particular state of life when we are young. But as the years go by we discover that those reasons, which were satisfactory and even energizing at the time, are no longer so. They were adequate enough to start out, to justify the involvement and almost without exception they were lacking in assuring perseverance throughout life. It is clear that the first reasons that brought us to share life with a group or with a person in general have an aspect which is rather superficial. The process of growing in a "vocation" needs to be recognized and re-assimilated so that the original call deepens. In this way a greater sense of life is acquired, an invitation that comes from without, from the Other. The first reasons, the second ones and the ones later on will be subjected to tests in successive crises. What is important is to reach the only Road that will lead us to the Father (4). The crisis of midlife is perhaps one of the most important ones experienced by mankind.

Seven centuries ago, an old Dominican monk experienced and meditated on this very reality. Johannes Tauler was born in 1300 and died on June 16, 1361. He lived in Strasbourg, preaching in various monasteries of the Rhineland. A disciple of Eckhart, he belonged to the mystic movement of north and central Europe. Intellectually he was related to Suso and Ruybrusco. He explained his experience by means of sermons and his writings were translated into Latin (similar to Laurentius Surius in 1548), and so he influenced all of Europe. His thinking was even reflected in the reforms of Luther and Gerhard Tersteegen (1697-1769). His source was Dionysius the Areopagite and here his thinking was linked to a vision of the "depth of the soul" along the lines of Hindu experience or Zen masters of Japanese Buddhism.

For Tauler this crisis was a work of the grace of God: God turns everything upside down to search for the lost drachma:

"When a soul arrives at that house and there looks for God, the house is in disarray and then God looks for him and puts the house in disarray again just like all who are searching: he tosses one thing here, another there until he finds what he is looking for".

The disarray that God creates allows us to discover our own depth and thus achieve a spiritual maturity that is more profitable than our entire being.

Carlos Garreto (5) wrote about this experience:

"This is the time when God decides to put man between a rock and a hard place from where up until now he has escaped behind a curtain of smoke 'half in, half out'.

By means of these setbacks, tedium, darkness and even more frequently and more significantly, the vision or experience of sinfulness, man discovers who he is: a poor, fragile being, weak, a totality of pride and pettiness, a thoughtless individual, lazy and illogical".

We often react poorly when faced with a crisis that God has brought about for us. It is often not realized that God might be doing something for me and that it might be important to let God's work do its thing. We want protection:

*Hear my cry, O God; listen to my prayer.  
From the end of the earth I call to you,  
when my heart is faint.  
Lead me to the rock that is higher than I;  
for you are my refuge,  
a strong tower against the enemy (6).*

As we flee what is trying to grab us, we take fallacious paths, which, for Tauler, take on various forms:

#### 1. Reforming the externals:

Since we don't want to reform ourselves, we try to reform what is external. We try to change what is outside ourselves as if this will compensate for what is inside.

#### 2. Clinging to externals:

Clinging to external religious practices, "things" that have to work well, maintaining what has worked well for us in the past. In summary, we try to remain closed in on ourselves in a rigid type of way.

#### 3. Trying new forms of life:

We incessantly try to instill new forms in our life. It is as if we hope that a solution will be found in external forms and in so doing we rid ourselves of "traditional" forms and try to replace them with new ones. That's why there are separations, changes in religious state, abandonment...

#### 4. Refraining from:

If the previous description had to do with change, this concept is just the opposite. Refraining means to stay at the current mode of life and refraining from taking that step that might lead to change. In religious life this often manifests itself in rigidity and in a reassertion of exercises of piety or in a scrupulosity in the religious life (religious duties, Masses, etc.). This, which can appear to be something good, is usually accompanied by a lack of real love (complaining about others, making judgments about their moral or religious laxity). One often hears "This is a model Christian that I can show others to imitate". However, neither love nor the goodness of Christ is being fostered, no enthusiasm is being generated, these types of people often leave their "aroma" of pedantry lying around as well as their mental narrowness, lack of joy and sense of self-righteousness.

Those "principles", when they are followed so rudely and stressfully, Tauler calls "idols" since they avoid any meeting with the true God. Along these lines of thought, the security that our religious convictions offer are more important than a personal encounter with God. Sometimes we enclose ourselves in pious attitudes thinking that we will be more pious because of them. Using external actions, pious activity and religious activism we try to hide the fact that we have no real relationship with our own "depth". In summary, God is a stranger whom we fear since he can destroy our securities and self-justification. And so we create a wall of irreproachable fundamental behavior with a view to stopping God who wants to show us our own reality.

This in no way means that we should be left with nothing. Tauler does not suggest the abandonment of religious exercises; these should, however, assist "the interior man" to reach his goal.

We should remember that in midlife mankind changes from being outward-looking to inward-looking: "Priests in the Old Testament were permitted to guard the temple at exactly age 50 and up until they reached that age they were merely temple administrators and busy about other activities (St. Gregory the Great, in the biography of St. Benedict).

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(1) These reflections are based on the text of Grüm Anselm, "Midlife as a spiritual task. The crisis of age 40-50." Narcea, Madrid, 1993, 5<sup>th</sup> edition. At times I take the liberty of citing freely from this work. The paragraphs within quotation marks, without reference, are taken from this work.

(2) Psalm 6:1-7.

(3) Psalm 88:4-18 (selections). This is one of the "black" psalms. Just as many lamentations end with hope, this psalm ends with no answer that might make one hope for an improvement or change in the situation.

(4) Cf. Louf, André. "El camino cisterciense". Verbo Divino, 1981. Estella, 1981, p. 17.

(5) Garreto, Carlos. "Cartas del Desierto", chapter 10.

(6) Psalm 61:1-3.