

"Smell of perfume..."

"THE HOUSE WAS FILLED WITH THE

Affective emotional and corporeal process in the different stages of a Woman following Jesus

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Introduction:

I have rewritten this book¹ , thinking of concrete faces of sisters, consecrated religious, who like the women of the Dawn, desirous and in search of the Lord Jesus, live the great desire to find him, to give themselves totally; to grow and mature in the surrender of life. This book is dedicated to them, from different congregations and geographical origins, who have had or still have the heart lit by the fire of love and want to enter into a process of liberation and growth. Also to those who have lost hope and along the way have been extinguished, those who have been wounded and in the scars of their hearts there are only smoldering ashes of what once was joy, meaning and love. I think of them, wishing with all my heart that this book may have healing effects, care, love and growth for each one of them.

It is an instrument that addresses the theme of *affective and sexual maturity in consecrated feminine life*. To read and enter into the proposal made in this book implies a commitment to personal work, and for those who are willing and able, a community exercise that will help to "walk together" in this process of growth towards an integrated affectivity.

It seems to me that we all perceive the "centrality" of this theme, insofar as it is the natural source, so to speak, of what can become, with the help of grace, the vital force of our consecrated life: the passionate and self-giving love for Jesus, "our only love"² and for our sisters and brothers.

Accompanying various sisters and communities, I have realized that when looking for tools for affective-sexual maturation, different psychological perspectives and group dynamics are used, with the false illusion of believing that by working on the human level, the sisters, especially those in initial formation (but including all ages, since we are always in formation), will make a qualitative leap and will pass as if it were a continuous and direct line to live a mature chastity. However, this human work, very necessary by the way, remains incomplete, if it only approaches the affective-sexual dynamics from a psychological horizon³ , because to grow towards an affective maturity that is oriented to live consecrated chastity, needs simultaneously an integral

¹ In 2007 I published a book with this title. Part of what I wrote, I reworked it for the Claretian Sisters in Rome who asked me for this work for their Congregation. The feedback I received on the application of this work instrument was very good, and as several congregations ask to approach this topic, so fundamental in the formation and in the line of care and prevention of abuses, it seemed to me that offering it to all the religious sisters could help to respond to the needs of many communities. I hope it can be of great personal and community use.

² Pope Francis. "C'est la confiance": *Apostolic Exhortation on trust in God's merciful love on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the birth of St. Therese of the Child Jesus and of the Holy Face*. 8.

³ There are different psychological approaches that do not include the possibility of transcendence and of living a "consecrated chastity". It is therefore necessary to consider an interdisciplinary perspective that opens the horizon to transcendence.

and interdisciplinary perspective, since the direction and the goal to which all the affective-emotional strength should be oriented and directed: is the desire to respond to a personal call of Jesus Christ.

The vigor, the energy, the fire of attraction of this call, together with the deep desire to respond with fidelity, has such a great vitality and inner strength that it unifies and unites all the affective-sexual dynamics, orienting it towards the profound desire to follow Jesus, to know him, to love him and to make him known and loved with one's own life, given to sisters and brothers. In other words, it is an existential choice of life that is made throughout a concrete, historical process, where all the human forces, capacities and potentialities are integrated towards the "One Love" until arriving at the total donation of life. It is a process of slow growth, with moments of progress, falls and redemption (cf. Lonergan). In this process of integration, with its ups and downs and possibilities of redemption, the human and the divine of each person are interwoven simultaneously, involving our whole being, our heart, emotions, affections, sexuality, corporeality, in a word, the totality of the person in all stages of life.

In order to have a clearer vision of the implications of this integration process, I will use a biblical image: Mary of Bethany. I will try to enter into her heart, into her affections, to follow in her footsteps and identify the emotional and affective characteristics that she experienced as a woman in love with Christ.

To enter into the life of Mary of Bethany, I will do it following what appears of her in the Gospel of John. I distinguish 7 stages characterized by the content of some Gospel verses. In each of the stages there are three sections; one refers to emotions, affections and the body, another deals with relationships and the last section takes into account the context. In each of these three sections I have put some questions that can help you in your personal work (others may come to your mind).

Perhaps some communities would like to live this process together, so I thought that after some personal work, each of the stages could be shared in community. If so, it would be a good idea to set up a community space to pray together and share freely. We could begin the moment of encounter with a song to the Holy Spirit and read the biblical verse of the stage to be shared, pray for a few minutes in silence, and then move on to the second moment, which would be to share in common each stage, simply answering these questions: what touched my heart? what have I realized? what do I feel invited to do?

For this work to be fruitful, I invite you to pray personally, to meditate, to listen to your heart, to be honest with yourselves. What each one lives in truth before God will give the possibility to grow and mature. In case the community decides to make the journey together, there are two aspects that I would invite you to take into consideration:

1) the meetings should be spaced out, for example once a month, so that each sister has sufficient time, in the midst of daily activity, to process her personal work.

2) during the sharing it is not necessary to say big and brilliant ideas, it is rather to create the possibility of walking together in this process, respecting the stage that each one is living.

Now without further ado, and wishing that this little book-workshop will bear much fruit in each of you and in your communities, we will now enter into the subject following in the footsteps of Mary of Bethany.

Key words: body, feelings, affections, stages, context, woman.

1. CONCERN: First stage of growth

"Many Jews had come to the house of Martha and Mary. to comfort them for their brother. When Martha found out that Jesus had come, came to meet him, while Mary remained at home" Jn 11:19-20.

Mary of Bethany is faced with two strong experiences: the death of her brother Lazarus and the absence of the Friend she trusted. Faced with this situation, surely the questions and concerns were crowded within her, but she still could not formulate them like her sister Martha (Jn 11:20). However, she expressed her pain and cried. Her sister Martha had *gone out of herself* to meet the Lord (Jn 11:20). Mary instead stayed at home. *What does it mean to stay at home?* is it something symbolic? does it mean to be within oneself? maybe. Mary does not understand the mystery of death, there the meaning of life is put to test, she sought answers in Jesus, and her *Friend* had not presented himself. The Jews comforted her, but surely this consolation did not touch the depth of her questions (Jn 11:31).

Mary's crying manifests in a bodily way the *restlessness* she possibly had in her *heart*, a restlessness she felt throughout her body. She cried, she allowed herself to be comforted, but she was not at peace (later she verbally expressed her concern Jn 11:32). In various ways, people who seek the deep meaning of life begin their process with a *restlessness*, a *dissatisfaction* that is generated in contact with life and reality⁴⁴. We are questioned by the Truth. Similar situations in many seekers of God tell us that this is the starting point of every process. Restlessness is usually a sign of something deeper, of the "thirst for God" that every human being experiences (Jn 4).



What was or is the main concern of my youth and your life today? What was the concern that moved me to respond to my vocational call?, what did I feel?, what events are related?

How do I feel today in relation to the life I am living as a consecrated woman? are there tears in my eyes? joy, sadness?

1.1 Emotional and bodily affective characteristics

Restlessness is felt in the body, it is experienced in the soul, it is lived in the anxiety that nothing fills the human heart. It is a physical, affective, cognitive experience that touches the whole person, an existential restlessness that involves the totality of those who allow themselves to be questioned.

This restlessness, functioning as a bridge between the temporal and the eternal, reflects physically, psychologically, and spiritually, that we are created by God, and that we have an insatiable thirst for

⁴⁴ This concern refers to the dialectical experience experienced by every human being who asks questions and questions the meaning of life with desires of transcendence. Cf. LONERGAN B.J.F., *Method*, 235-245.

infinity. Some women and men, especially during their youth, but it can be at any age, experience within themselves, in various ways, a personal and social dissatisfaction with the world in which they live. They have desires for change, a thirst that speaks of the seed of eternity present in their heart, and that puts into play the dialectic of the whole person. This also manifests itself in the body.^{5 5}

-  There are many types of restlessness and anxiety... What causes me anxiety and restlessness?
-  What feelings, affections, and bodily manifestations manifest that I am not at peace?
-  Do I hear the deep restlessness of the soul, of my life?

1.2 Relational aspect from the female perspective

Dissatisfaction or anxiety, to which reference is made, is not born of a personal problem, although it converges with personal concerns and moves in the psychology of people. In the development of this dissatisfaction, the woman's capacity for empathy and connection can function as a double-edged sword: as an ally that helps generate restlessness and thirst for infinity or in a contrary way as a "calming" that silences the inner cries of eternity. Many have lived this dialectic and the evangelist makes it present in Mary of Bethany: she remained at home, wept and was comforted by her Jewish friends (Jn 11:31). The consolation of friends is one of the reasons given by the evangelist why Mary did not go out to meet Jesus.

In Mary of Bethany, as in so many other women, the relationship and the capacity for connection can function as silencers of the deep restlessness of the heart. The Friend she wished to meet was at the door of her house, but she remained inside, amid consolations that prevented her from leaving. Only silence allows deep and profound listening to what inhabits the human heart.

-  Do I silence the deep concerns of my heart? How and what do I do?
-  Can I identify what my inner conflict is today?
-  What do I look for in relationships with others and others?
-  Is it possible that I use some relationship as "soothing" that prevents me from hearing from the depth of my heart what I feel and what is happening to me?

1.3 The body, affections and emotions

We are interested in the connection between the inner states of the spirit, the psyche and the emotions and affections that manifest themselves in bodily expressions, so that we can live a spirituality that includes the whole person. In today's culture, the body is given excessive importance, as a symbol of youth, health, sexuality, and beauty. Cultural meanings are created to which people feel enslaved to respond, and which definitely influence the way they conceive of their being as a

⁵ It is necessary to make a distinction between what would be a somatization that has its origin in unconscious conflicts, and the restlessness that arises from the inner dialectic between the call to transcendence and the confrontation with the reality that is lived.

woman. With fashion, patterns of beauty, health, sexuality, ways of dressing and responding to the consumer society are created. Above all, women in the mass media are presented as an instrument of sexual consumption, as an object.

There are also today, more than in other times, bodily signs that indicate the presence of internal conflicts, for example, anorexia, (especially in the countries of the first world), as well as bulimia. The body records the experiences that each person lives, and manifests conscious and unconscious conflicts in various ways, and occasions somatizing. It is necessary to make a space of inner silence and run the risk of listening and recognizing the language of the body⁶. Women tend to live in greater connection with their own body and with the various bodily sensations. The menstrual cycle makes you experience the changes you live, the pain, the tiredness, the rhythm of life. These are elements that will help you make this connection.

-  My body speaks: do I hear my body?
-  What do you say to me and what can I hear?
-  Are there any events, disappointments, or conflicts that are related to any illness in my body?
-  What should I do to start listening to my body?

1.4 My being as a woman in my cultural and ecclesial context

In some cultures, the excessive emphasis of the female role linked to an image of an object woman or heroic mother (super-woman), can cause dynamics of rejection in young women, and unconsciously create guilt, since by the fact of being women they have to live an automatism of generosity and service with which they annul their own freedom. The desire for self-giving must be forged in the maturation of the person until freely deciding the donation, it cannot be given as the result of a role that must be performed. The victimhood that is generated on many occasions as a result of an expected heroism to live as mothers, creates a state of lamentation, bitterness and apparent self- denial that prevents genuine attitudes of donation.

It is necessary to decode, and deconstruct these cultural concepts that are ordinarily unconscious and that many women assume without realizing it and cause them sadness for not being those super- women that they must be according to these sociocultural criteria.

⁶ There are techniques to listen to body language, for example, the technique of Focusing, Cf. GENDLIN E., *Focusing*, or a type of therapy that manages to unite the language of the body and the word bringing to light unconscious conflicts. Cf. DOWNING G., *Il Corpo e la Parola*. It is necessary to listen to the body and go to the cause of the conflict that may be of unconscious origin. This requires special techniques that help people enter into themselves. In the body the tensions and anxieties of the human being are manifested. In medicine and quantum mechanical studies, the close relationship between diseases, moods, tensions and

unconscious conflicts is increasingly delved into.

-  What is the concept of women in my culture?
-  Does this concept have anything to do with my way of developing, of feeling, of giving myself as a consecrated woman?