

## The fragile movements of faith

### The soul and the harp/21 - One cannot believe without valuing all of humanity, nothing and no one excluded

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"The book of Psalms dominates all the others because it summarizes what the others contain and adds something of its own in its song. Other books contain the Law, they announce the Messiah; this book describes the movements of the soul".

**Anastasius' Epistle to Marcellini** (4th century A.D.)

**Trust and faith are kindred words. Without one, there can be no other, and faith is a relationship marked by vulnerability. Psalm 91 tells us about the nature of faith in**

**terms of trust.**

Trust is a radically vulnerable relationship. When a person trusts another, he or she puts something of his or her own in the hands of the other, that the other could dispose of or even abuse. The root of that special joy we feel when someone places his or her trust in us, because we feel that they have asked us to keep something precious that concerns their person, their intimacy, their mystery, even when it is just a matter of something simple and material, lies in the trusting person's act of exposing him or herself. This condition of vulnerability grows with the value of that "something" being deposited in the hands of the other, in the "palm of his or her hand". A vulnerability that also has its own value has typical properties that change and generally improve the nature of a relationship. Showing others our vulnerability, making it intentionally evident to them, while making us weaker also makes us stronger, thanks to the transformative dimension of vulnerable trust. The first and most important guarantee that those who have received this trust will *honour* it is that they feel honoured by that very act of trust - too many debts are not honoured simply because our financial system tends to humiliate rather than honour the debtor.

If whoever performs an act of entrustment also does everything to reduce and possibly cancel the risk of misuse and betrayal that is intrinsic to trust, they end up reducing and cancelling the very value of that relational asset. If, for example, when writing a contract I define the details up to and including all possible future situations in order to prevent myself from any possible misuse of that fiduciary relationship, I am giving the other party a message of distrust that changes the nature of the relationship that we are building. Many relationships are nipped in the bud because the desire to exclude any future risk and wrongdoing creates such a climate of distrust that it prevents the relationship from even beginning. Trust that lacks vulnerability is of no good or value. We see this in relation to wives and husbands, sons and daughters, colleagues, friends, whom we love and who love us, as long as we are able to trust them (and they trust us) without having perfect guarantees on their reciprocity, although we depend on it for our happiness. In many relationships, trust is mutual. It is a meeting of relational goods, not necessarily symmetrical. Then when trust concerns some decisive relationships in our life, the relationship of trust takes on a *ternary* form: there is me trusting you, there is you trusting me, and there is a third person who places him or herself between us, as guarantor or witness.

It is, above all, the ternary or Trinitarian dimension of faith and trust that strikes you when reading the famous Psalm 91, a prayer that is precious to many religious traditions: «Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, "He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust"» (Psalm 91,1-2). This "trialogue" between the protagonist of the Psalm (who was perhaps spending the night in a temple waiting for an oracle in a dream), his God and a third party who teaches him trust-faith is very beautiful indeed. Biblical faith essentially has a ternary nature. Between a person of faith and his God there is also someone telling him that he can be trusted. This someone is a prophet, he is Abraham or Moses, he is the Torah, but he is also your brother or sister in faith. Psalm 91 does not tell us who this third person who teaches faith to the praying person is, and this anonymity is beautiful because that "someone" can be anyone, it can be me, it can be you. Not all of us have a prophet beside us to teach us about faith, but we all have a person who can teach us to believe and trust. A person who tells us: «Surely he will save you from the fowler's snare and from the deadly pestilence. He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart. You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday» (Psalm 91,3-6). And we answer: «The Lord is my refuge!» (Psalm 91,9): this is the second movement of faith, when after having believed in whoever taught him or her the faith-trust, the believer makes his or her declaration of faith. This movement is second, because, first, there is someone giving me faith - faith will end on earth the day the last believer stops passing it on to someone else.

Here too lies the meaning and value of Tradition: it is the chain of people who have taught each other about faith, that cord of solidarity explained over the centuries, made up of people and communities who have learned to believe in God by believing in other people's words. A continuous dialogue between those who tell us to trust and us responding with our affirmative and then telling others to trust our word because they are not-ours. Biblical faith is believing in God by believing the people who speak to us in his name by sticking their head above the grass. It is always a community experience, an event that happens among people, a mutual *relationship of trust*. Sometimes we are unable to believe because we are unable to trust, and practicing inter-human trust is an excellent preparation for faith. Whoever does not *trust* anyone, does not *believe* in God either, whoever trusts little in men trusts God a little too, and hence faith becomes a cognitive act that cannot change our lives.

Finally, we have the third movement. God enters the scene: «I will rescue him; I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name. He will call on me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honour him. With long life I will satisfy him and show him my salvation» (Psalm 91,14-16). In formulating his promise, God exposes himself to the possibility of the non-fulfilment of these words, because history is a continuous show of faithful and just people who invoke and receive *no* answer, who are not made glorious, and who only end up knowing failure. And this is because biblical faith shares the same vulnerability inscribed in any relationship of true trust, true precisely *because* it is vulnerable. Because we have no direct knowledge of the one we trust, we only know him "by hearsay" (Job), we know him because we have "heard" about him from those we trust. For we and God both change constantly, every morning we have to think back to what we believed until last night - faith is an act of trust conjugated to the present. A decisive stage of mature faith consists in one day becoming aware that when we pronounce the word "God", the most beautiful, familiar and intimate word there is, we do not know what we are saying - but nonetheless we continue to say it, because these words can only ever be loved. This is why some great biblical vocations also include some form of a complicated entrustment in the beginning: Moses does not want to return to Egypt, Jeremiah recalculates, Jonah flees, Samuel needs four callings before finally saying: "here I am". Elijah had to learn to listen to the silence and YHWH learn to whisper, in order for him to get up and continue his journey.

If trusting in faith was not risky and vulnerable, faith would not be an authentically human experience, and by becoming believers, we would instead become less human. Those who in their lives have encountered a voice that called them and answered them, know that that risk is real and effective, because they know that sometimes even authentic vocations can go bad, they lose their way, and they get lost in immense pain (theirs and God's). We do not know why even true vocations can end badly. Failure is part of the human condition, and an infallible calling would simply be inhuman. Moreover, it is this very possibility that the faith-trust we have placed in a mystery could go wrong, that makes it a very human experience, similar in its dignity to motherhood, to being born and dying. Our faith is an entirely human experience due to its *tragic dimension*. One can be fully human without valuing faith and those

who believe, but one cannot believe without valuing humanity, all of it, without leaving anything out on the journey leading from hell to heaven and back again.

This Psalm was quoted by Satan, in the episode with the temptation of Christ: «Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written: "He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone"» (Matthew 4,5-6). Satan here quotes verse 12 of Psalm 91. And Jesus responds to Satan by reiterating the entrusting nature of biblical faith: «Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test'"» (Matthew 4,7). An important message of this splendid verse that ends up in Satan's mouth is the Bible exceeding its good uses alone. Even the devil knows and uses the same scripture known and used by the evangelists, telling us that merely knowing and quoting the Bible offers no guarantee of life or of authenticity of doctrine. There is a diabolical use of scripture, even of the Psalms and prayer, to the point that Satan takes one of the most sublime and lofty prayers in the Psalter to tempt Jesus. Jesus' use of the Bible and Satan's use both coexist within us - if only at least we were aware of it!

Here too lies the vulnerability of the Bible: there are its words, exposed in the public square of the world, and anyone can use them to pray, to love better, to learn how to live; but we can all also use them to curse, to condemn, to tempt, and to manipulate men and God, to blaspheme. Even God trusts us, putting his words in our hearts, and we can betray them. In hell there is not only "Pape Satàn pape Satàn aleppe" (The Divine Comedy, Inferno, D. Alighieri) there may also be biblical words being abused and raped. By choosing to speak to us, to speak to us in human words, God has chosen to share our fragility. In this too, he resembles us. This is the fourth movement of faith.