

The Texts of the Convivium

ETERNAL LIFE: JUST WHAT IS IT EXACTLY?

**To what final experience
does a Christianity
lived through to the end
open up the road for us?**

Our holidays spent in a little village in southern Lazio have given us ample possibility, over more than thirty years, to study more deeply a phenomenology of those populations which, in a certain way, and with all due respect, we could define as being primitive-archaic.

How do the men live? And the women...?

The former attended school for a few years to then dedicate themselves to working for decades to finally retire as pensioners. However pension doesn't exist for the women.

So how do these men, with all the long years ahead of them left to live (the air in that village extends their life expectancy) kill time? They arise early, have breakfast to then potter about in their much loved vegetable patch. It is the "prelude", if not "to the afternoon of a faun", to the morning of a villager who enjoys his well deserved rest. A visit to the local doctor's surgery, showing his face at the inn where he practises the intelligence of he who remembers better the cards that have not yet come out of the pack. Here even the interruption of saying hello to those who enter the room could be a fatal distraction.

These morning activities are followed by long hours spent sitting on the benches placed outside in order to watch the other folk pass by, offering them the chance to pass comments which are not always benevolent. Midday is lunchtime, digested by the usual "forty winks" after which it's time to go out once again for a walk until dinner time and then it's finally time to sleep the sleep of the just (well I'm not sure!) which ends the slothful day.

Whilst the men grow numb in idleness, the women are far more active: they go to the market, do the washing, the ironing, the dusting and sweeping, needlework, the cooking and nursing.

Any free time left over is dedicated to the good God. They're in the church at half past four in the afternoon for the service: rosary, litany and the holy mass. It's a common meeting but also a social occasion and one of earthly friendship with the good-natured exchange of gossip.

Men and women delight in what life has yet to offer them. It's all they need because of their limitation in mental horizons. If only it could last forever!

One afternoon I went for a walk with my wife up the road that wraps right round the village like a ring round that that overlooks onto a vast plain that stretches out to the sea. Sitting there on two chairs were two old women of almost a hundred years old having reached the advanced stages of decrepitude. Conversation struck up between the four of us on the usual subject of old age. Eh, old age! Old age with its harsh infirmities... But as long as we're still alive...

"And in the end", I said, "after life on this earth we can look forward to eternal life".

"What do you mean by ...this eternal life?"

"It's the one promised to us by Jesus Christ. One speaks of nothing else in church. Maybe you don't go to church every day?"

"Of course we do but...what does this eternal life mean? What am I supposed to do with it?"

"It's the life of another world, of a new world, a wonderful one. We'd live there happily forever."

"But I'm fine just where I am now!"

"Yeah right, with all the infirmities of old age, all the illnesses..."

“Oh alright, well, as long as I’m still alive...”

It’s an eternal life that nobody can even imagine, seeing as the concrete short accounts dedicated to it by the Gospels appear vague.

“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom”, is the sorrowful prayer that the “good robber” directed to the divine Master in the torment of the crucifix.”

“Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise”, is the resolute answer given by the Lord (Lk. 23, 39-43).

Being in Paradise with Jesus is the mysterious goal whose beauty can only be fully understood by a believer, whose divine Spirit inspires the strongest love. The deep mystery of love and of the sacred love!

Paradise is a stable situation, which nothing can change, which nothing can make an attempt on.

It’s a condition of extreme happiness. How can we imagine it?

The Koran gives us a very vivid and seductive idea of it in human terms: the high beds, the *uri* virgins, all that over-abundance of gold and silver in the backgrounds of gardens, pavilions, fountains, all this turns out to be capable even of inducing many young people to suicide as a weapon for the holy war.

There are moods, which, even though they culminate in the highest peaks of ecstasy, they already offer the first traces of it to our human levels. In the lack of something that gratifies or at least seduces our physical senses, we could benefit by the memory of a fascinating spiritual research, of an artistic creation, of a contemplation of beauty, of an ecstatic experience, of a brilliant scientific intuition, of an idyll that blossoms into a great love, and in short, of truly happy moments. Can we vividly remember one of those “magical moments” and the supreme joy it gave us?

Well, let’s try to imagine a boundless, timeless, immense joy. From science to omniscience, from the limitation of our ordinary possibilities to almightiness, from creation on a normal level to supreme creation, from our human condition to a completely new divine condition.

We ask ourselves, why does the biologist want to know everything about the animal and vegetable nature right down to the last species and race, right down to the last anthill? And why does the most noble and up to date curious mind of the historian and of the reporter of recent French trend also want to embrace the trivial events of the most humble of families? And why does astronomy want to investigate the entire universe right down to the most distant stars?

To see everything together, in only one glance. To see all things present, past and future; and all the events at the same time. With the vision of all things, to achieve the power over everything, with omniscience, with omnipotence. And creativity aimed at the supreme limitless beauty in infinite joy. What more can one ask? Where can one find the words...?

I well understand, it is the thing which will use our imagination taking it beyond all borders. But when it is no longer possible to refer to representations linked to matter, to visibility, to tangibility, then we have no other option than to start from experiences of pure mental nature. It is only in this way that we will be able to form a first extremely vague idea of the immensity of the divine promises.

In quantitative terms eternal life is pursued by our very own elderly ladies, like the synonym of a condition that never ends. Therefore our two old friends could like the idea of a decrepitude destined to grow longer in time without limits.

Such a concept of eternal life has to appear extremely reductive. The concept that the Gospel has is not certain, whereby eternal life, even before existence without limits, even before life extended forever, is perfect life.

The common man is an individual who is satisfied and content with very little.

The opposite paradigm is offered by an anecdote on the childhood of saint Teresa of Lisieux. One of her older sisters showed her a basket full of different coloured ribbons. And she asked her: “Which ones will you choose?”

“I want them all” replied the child, who already in that children’s game, showed her own desire for the infinite.

There is, indeed, an extremely widespread fear amongst us humans of the greater things, whatever their real beauty is.

Time for another anecdote, with much less famous characters. In the south of Italy I have two friends, both philosophy teachers in secondary schools. Each one is a truly unique fellow, jovial, a wise investigator “of the expert world and the human vices and value”, to use the language of Dante’s Ulysses.

One day they adopted a local beggar as their human guinea pig. This man is also an eccentric and odd man with his own peculiar habits: rather than stretching out his hand to beg, he assesses his benefactor, who is precisely, peremptorily asked to hand out half a euro.

One day my two friends decided to give the beggar a hundred euro note rather than half a euro. They were curious to see what his reaction would be. However rather than being overcome with joy he grew angry. He was expecting half a euro, the hundred euro note was far too much and it bothered him greatly.

People say that one day the Pope of that period suddenly put a cardinal’s hat onto Saint Philip Neri’s head: sign of elevation to that extremely high much coveted dignity. But the saint threw the hat into the air exclaiming: “Paradise! Paradise!”

Eternal life, paradise... this is the important thing, the only necessary thing. Jesus declares it and the apostle Peter confirms it.

Jesus was a guest of Martha, who did her utmost to offer him the honours of the house, whereas her sister Mary at the Master’s feet was only intent on listening to his teachings. Martha asked her divine Guest to urge her sister to give her a hand with the chores. But she replied; “Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her” (Lk. 10, 38-42).

When many disciples drew back from him, Jesus asked the apostles: “Do you also wish to go away?” and here is Peter’s reply in the name of all of them: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (Jn. 6, 66-69).

Unlike the good old lady who grew up in the country parish school, the newly ordained apostle Peter, even though unable to deepen the discourse in all its implications, already knew, or rather already guessed well, what “eternal life” meant. However, in a much more direct manner than those women we met on our walk, wasn’t Peter in the presence of that God incarnate who irradiated all life?

If only all those who make themselves guides of souls truly “imitate” Christ by instilling in them the sense of eternal life!

And this sense of eternal life, what real sensations can it include? One can try some of it, experience some of it in first person in those ecstasies that the saints cannot explain, but only communicate with extraordinary overwhelming strength.

A real eternal life (as reality even glimpsed from afar) has to correspond to the sense of eternal life as a final condition to achieve, as a potentiality, as an open possibility, at most, to each one of us humans.