

Against you alone have I sinned

1. We have just heard the Miserere, one of the most famous prayers of the Psalter, the most intense and commonly used penitential psalm, the hymn of sin and pardon, a profound meditation on guilt and grace. The Liturgy of the Hours makes us pray it at Lauds every Friday. For centuries the prayer has risen to heaven from the hearts of many faithful Jews and Christians as a sigh of repentance and hope poured out to a merciful God.

The Jewish tradition placed the psalm on the lips of David, who was called to repentance by the severe words of the prophet Nathan (cf. vv. 1-2; 2 Sam 11-12), who rebuked him for his adultery with Bathsheba and for having had her husband Uriah killed. The psalm, however, was enriched in later centuries, by the prayer of so many other sinners, who recovered the themes of the “new heart” and of the “Spirit” of God placed within the redeemed human person, according to the teaching of the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel (cf. v. 12; Jer 31,31-34; Ez 11,19. 36,24-28).

2. Psalm 50 (51) outlines two horizons. First, there is the dark region of sin (cf. vv. 3-11) in which man is placed from the beginning of his existence: “Behold in guilt I was born, a sinner was I conceived” (v. 7). Even if this declaration cannot be taken as an explicit formulation of the doctrine of original sin as it was defined by Christian theology, undoubtedly it corresponds to it: indeed, it expresses the profound dimension of the innate moral weakness of the human person. The first part of the Psalm appears to be an analysis of sin, taking place before God. Three Hebrew terms are used to define this sad reality, which comes from the evil use of human freedom.

3. The first term, hattá, literally means “falling short of the target”: sin is an aberration which leads us far from God, the fundamental goal of our relations, and, consequently, also from our neighbour.

The second Hebrew term is “awôn, which takes us back to the image of “twisting” or of “curving”.

Sin is a tortuous deviation from the straight path; it is an inversion, a distortion, deformation of good and of evil; in the sense declared by Isaiah: “Woe to those who call good evil and evil good, who change darkness into light and light into darkness” (Is 5,20). Certainly, for this reason in the Bible conversion is indicated as a “return” (in Hebrew shûb) to the right way, correcting one’s course.

The third term the psalmist uses to speak of sin is peshá. It expresses the rebellion of the subject toward his sovereign and therefore an open challenge addressed to God and to his plan for human history.

4. If, however, man confesses his sin, the saving justice of God is ready to purify him radically. Thus we come to the second spiritual part of the psalm, the luminous realm of grace (cf. vv. 12-19). By the confession of sins, for the person who prays there opens an horizon of light where God is at work. The Lord does not just act negatively, eliminating sin, but recreates sinful humanity by means of his life-giving Spirit: he places in the human person a new and pure “heart”, namely, a renewed conscience, and opens to him the possibility of a limpid faith and worship pleasing to God.

Origen spoke of a divine therapy, which the Lord carries out by his word and by the healing work of Christ: “As God prepares remedies for the body from therapeutic herbs wisely mixed together, so he also prepared for the soul medicines with the words he infused, scattering them in the divine Scriptures.... God gave yet another medical aid of which the Lord is the Archetype who says of himself: “It is not the healthy who have need of a physician but the sick’. He is the excellent physician able to heal every weakness, and illness” (Origen, Homilies on the Psalms, From the Italian edition, *Omellie sui Salmi*, Florence, 1991, pp. 247-249).

5. The richness of Psalm 50 (51) merits a careful exegesis of every line. It is what we will do when we will meet it again at Lauds on successive Fridays. The overall view, which we have taken of this great Biblical supplication, reveals several fundamental components of a spirituality which should permeate the daily life of the faithful. There is above all a lively sense of sin, seen as a free choice, with a negative connotation on the moral and theological level: “Against you, you alone, have I sinned, I have done what is evil in your sight” (v. 6).

There is also in the psalm a lively sense of the possibility of conversion: the sinner, sincerely repentant, (cf. v 5), comes before God in his misery and nakedness, begging him not to cast him out from his presence (v. 13).

Finally, in the Miserere, a rooted conviction of divine pardon ” cancels, washes, cleanses” the sinner (cf. vv. 3-4) and is able to transform him into a new creature who has a transfigured spirit, tongue, lips and heart (cf. 4-19). “Even if our sins were as black as the night, divine mercy is greater than our misery. Only one thing is needed: the sinner has to leave the door to his heart ajar.... God can do the rest.... Everything begins and ends with his mercy”, so writes St Faustina Kowalska (M. Winowska, *The Ikon of Divine Mercy, the Message of Sister Faustina*, from the Italian version, *L’Icona dell’Amore Misericordioso. Il messaggio di Suor Faustina*, Rome, 1981, p. 271).