

'Living the experience of restlessness in a peaceful way; Xavier Thévenot in the footsteps of François de Sales'.

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Introduction

This presentation is divided into three stages. First, a critical reflection on the health crisis we have just experienced, which invites us to situate ourselves differently, on the threshold of a new beginning. Secondly, a reference to the work of Xavier Thévenot, a French Salesian moralist theologian, in particular to his notion of reference points, which he applied to the understanding of the educational encounter, but whose relevance goes far beyond the initial framework. Finally, a more perspective part on the perception of a post-COVID world that has become fundamentally restless, updating the ethical reference points proposed by Thévenot, as a reader of the writings of Saint Francis de Sales.

1. A world that has become insensitive and uncertain!

Among the various traumas the planet is going through, the health crisis deserves our attention because it invites us to consider the full extent of its manifestation. Indeed, the existential uncertainty into which it has plunged us since March 2020 is shaking our representations. It shakes beliefs and cracks the obvious. It takes us, individually and collectively, out of our comfort zone. It invites Christians to revitalise the ethics to which they are bearers and witnesses. In particular, it exposes us to a universal form of vulnerability that reminds us that we are fragile and fallible beings. By no means safe, this exposure is likely to continue, even if we do our best to believe otherwise. If the social consequences of the irruption of this viral pandemic are binding, this unprecedented situation can also be seen as an opportunity, a road yet to be conceived and travelled. It inaugurates a new paradigm, the relevance of which is linked to our collective ability to place ourselves in a precarious and uncertain, but curious and open, duration. What does it tell us?

The pandemic has suddenly plunged the planet into an era of uncertainty and lack of clarity. This generates anxiety that can escalate to a form of trauma that spares no one and creeps in everywhere. We all live, more or less as potential patients, in fear, dread and sometimes anxiety. Why do we do this? Because we perceive the possibility of being affected by the virus as a contamination that constitutes a kind of fear. Infection generates uncontrolled panic. We aspire to get out of this threatening period, in which our reference points have become blurred and reversible. We desperately project ourselves into the aftermath, a world of certainties and returning evidence, while unconsciously sensing deep down that this world may never emerge or return. This ordeal seems to have no end and is difficult to predict in the absence of a serene perspective. Periods of imprisonment are followed by moments of curfew; one finds oneself stuck in a kind of liminal parenthesis, separated from the previous world and not yet reaching the next world. The latter becomes a deficit figure that depletes hope and seriously undermines our imperative need for consolation.

This, however, fills a void that inner disturbances caused by anxiety and uncertainty feed. As an example, the figure of touching as a concrete act that consoles both the one who touches and the one who is touched is reassuring because it revitalises a hope capable of overcoming the unbearable. However, this perspective becomes remote and null when the social ethos closes in on itself, instituting distancing - from oneself and the other - as the new behavioural norm. Interaction loses its capacity for construction, its dimension of astonishment at the expense of distancing, which reduces the dynamics of intersubjectivity and encounter with otherness. The ethical deficit of presence is particularly cruel. The erratic handling of this crisis highlights the vulnerability of the human being, who is usually overlooked, far removed from our daily concerns. The eruption of this virus is disturbing because it reminds us of the immediate proximity of pain, sickness and death, which are difficult to comprehend and deal with. We are thus plunged into the world of uncertainty, a world of disturbed and troubled tranquillity, an uneasy ethos.

2. Xavier Thévenot's vision of the educational relationship (Xavier Thévenot, heir of Don Bosco)

This precarious and worrying world has a great need for reference points. This ethical support, indispensable for personal and community balance, existential and spiritual at the same time, is convincingly illustrated by rereading the work of the Salesian moralist theologian Xavier Thévenot (1938-2004), whose student I was at the Catholic Institute of Paris in the 1980s.

One of his reference works is precisely entitled *Ethical Principles for a New World* and the first edition was published in 1982; the world is being reborn every day. As a Salesian of Don Bosco, Thévenot never stopped listening and advising, suggesting and opening perspectives.

The heart of his work lies in directing educational action, enhancing the Salesian concept of social intervention without becoming discouraged, despite the illness that took his life. This is condensed in the main figure of educational activity as 'it is the place of the experience of God that itself inspires the sense of encounter with the other'. In this perspective, "a healthy action can become for the educator a privileged path towards God, that is, his mysticism and asceticism", a path lived within the framework of an experience of difference and similarity. By "mysticism" we mean "that which slowly makes the very mystery of God accessible". By "asceticism" we mean "that which makes it possible to shape one's life little by little according to the word of the Gospel". The active presence of God is thus manifested at the centre of social action.

How can we perceive and enjoy it? We must become aware of it, pay attention to it, invoke it and pray to it, as Francis de Sales invites us to do methodologically in his *Introduction to the Devout Life*. Consideration of a 'mystery' relating to the life of Christ, as St Ignatius'

spiritual exercises teach, allows us to feel and inhabit this joyful presence. It is a form of intimate experience with the divine, as long as this intimacy is kept - according to François Jullien - at a distance from a love that has become too noisy. Divine intimacy is a matter of closeness, of "proximity" without aiming at the other, an objective all the more possible insofar as the divine presence precedes us and calls us from the beginning. This experience of presence finds its presupposition in the acceptance of a love that comes to fill us, that, according to Jean-Louis Chrétien, expands us. The union of the soul with God, which is the end result of this experience of presence, is an experience of expansion that opens our heart, in the intimacy of prayer and the singular encounter with Christ.

Recognition of this form of contemplation leads the educator - but more generally the manager, the believer, the ecclesial animator - on a path of transformation, of inner plasticity, which is configured as a path of holiness through the reversal of the primary perspective of the educational objective; it is not a matter of transmitting a technique, however perfected, but only of experiencing "the result of God's educational effort towards us". This effort enables human freedom to encounter and be grasped by divine grace. We should, in a sense, become like the birds - these apode-albatrosses, who do not wander clumsily on the ground but take flight, caught in the wind of God, able to soar instead of being imprisoned in our alienations. Moreover, this certainty of Francis de Sales that Xavier Thévenot takes up in his article *Les ailes et le souffle* was forged in the suffering of trials, in the crossing of doubt and anguish:

"Francis de Sales, after an agonising trial in his youth, due to a radical doubt about the possibility of being saved, had acquired, by the time he wrote the *Treatise*, an unshakable conviction: God, in his very being, is compassionate and loves us with an infinite love. Therefore, he cannot remain insensitive to our misfortunes. He must send the favourable wind for our deliverance" .

This permanent conversion is a sort of passive way that obliges a permanent effort of lucidity on oneself that leads to humility, understood, according to the American Trappist monk Thomas Merton, as an attitude that "consists in living in the feeling of one's dependence on the invisible" or again, according to Gabriel Marcel, humility is "the attitude that makes us permeable to the infiltrations of the invisible" . This virtue, this quality, this ability is therefore capable of reducing "the emptiness of our spiritual life". In contrast to perfection and the sense of omnipotence, the educator (the believer, the manager) is a kind of apprentice who defends himself from the temptation of fusion in the encounter with the other - the young person, the person with disabilities - by practising the right distance and the right closeness. The result is an anthropological conception based on the valorisation of richness and difference, the scope of which is universal.

In his most structured work, Thévenot does not hesitate to speak of a "path of being" in which the subject who finds himself before the face of God must not hesitate to engage in

an "ethical struggle" that makes the encounter with otherness an experience of precedence and the recognition of finitude a distinguishing mark of the human being and his fallibility. This struggle imposes itself in the post-COVID world, which we must continue to understand and within which the proclamation of the good news of the Gospel must not fail. Indeed, the more inhuman the world seems to become, the more the social ethos seems to be marked by complacency, narcissism and superficiality, the more it needs points of reference. It is not a matter of denying the traumatic nature of our times, but of adopting a different approach to social trauma, drawing on Salesian literary resources and proposing to interpret them in the logic of a process of transmission marked by an "inventive fidelity", as Guy Avanzini put it.

3. A reaffirmed need for reference points in a world marked by restlessness (Xavier Thévenot, heir of Francis de Sales)

The Lucan account of the annunciations illustrates the notion of restlessness as a characteristic sign of our times and for which (first part of our intervention) the elaboration and dissemination of relevant and reassuring ethical reference points is necessary.

Mary and Zechariah react to the same extraordinary event: the apparition of an angel bearing a message. Mary's astonishment in Lk 1:29: "At these words she was greatly troubled and wondered what this greeting could mean", and Zechariah's bewilderment in Lk 1:12 when the angel of the Lord appears to him: "At the sight of him Zechariah was troubled and frightened", constitute a kind of invasion. It saturates the space of sensations and representations. Above all, it disturbs the rational understanding, which desperately tries to grasp a possible explanation. To be the involuntary object of such an announcement means accepting to live in a regime of uncertainty.

As a hypothesis, we can assume that what is perceived by the actors is similar to an experience of disquiet. This notion can be understood as an open, unstressed attitude, capable of welcoming the unexpected. It means listening to oneself, letting one's emotions emerge. The mind wanders, without becoming fixated. It is open and curious. The restless being is unable to truly calm himself. Stability flees from him. The hoped-for serenity seems unattainable. He is searching, without having the certainty of success. His quest remains unfulfilled. Nevertheless, he is always ready to leave. Some authors propose a reading of the Gospel based on this approach; that of an inaugural space that spreads uncontrollable anxiety. In this conception, all relationships are dislocated. Its unpredictability never ceases to surprise: 'Nothing leaves one more serene than an encounter. Whether it generates annoyance, passion, confusion, recognition, debt, a new familiarity or an unsettling strangeness, the encounter bequeaths a face and irreducible questions'. Here we find the mysterious dimension of the educational relationship mentioned earlier by Xavier Thévenot.

The double announcement of which Mary and Zechariah are the recipients in Luke's Gospel definitively transforms their destiny. It inaugurates a new existential phase. For both of them,

nothing will ever be the same again. The announcement marks a break in the continuity of their respective lives. This irruption of discontinuity is the sign of a metamorphosis for which the evangelical actors are not prepared. Hence the deeply disturbing impact that assails and overwhelms them. Every encounter, in fact, is by its very nature disconcerting and obliges more than invites, following the example of Abraham (Gen 12:1), to leave one's own comforts, one's own habits, one's own points of reference in order to set out and go towards the other. There is nothing comfortable about this new posture, which is above all the attestation and recognition of a divine election: "The dam of the predictable breaks in the earthquake of an encounter. It is the stranger who introduces the strange into our lives, it is the victory of the other, the acceptance of disorder, the consent to disorder. It is accepting, in short, to no longer fixate on anything' . The abandonment of fixity, the renunciation of the predictable, the uncertainty that is set in motion, this is what Mary and Zacharias felt and understood in a flash. It was impossible, in the midst of the divine encounter, to develop 'a methodology for avoiding restlessness' that would allow them to 'banish risk-taking'.

What Mary and Zechariah experienced can be applied, by analogy, to our contemporaries, who are also marked by uncertainty and intransigence. How, from this perspective, can we help to reassure the social ethos marked by such disorientation? How can we manage to construct ourselves, to structure our internal reference points? Xavier Thévenot, meditating on François de Sales (*Traité de l'amour de Dieu*, Book II and Book IX), proposes a pertinent approach, centred on the notion of 'university'.

This neologism expresses a double reality: the importance of distinction and variety must not be confused with confusion and disorder. In other words, differences are riches that contribute to unifying being in its diversity. This positive view of existence makes it possible to reject society's morbid tendency to level out differences by exacerbating particularities. "Living from God - from a triune God, hence unidiverse - means resisting uniformity and fragmentation," explains Thévenot . It is about working for unity in diversity, 'challenging different apprehensions', as Jean Baruzi reminds us. This spiritual stance makes it possible to counter psychological or social strategies of undifferentiation. It is of such a nature as to reassure, to be durably inscribed in a trust that derives from an infinite and unprecedented divine love that precedes us. Even more intimately, the unidiverse allows us to build a spiritual unity, provided we are sensitive and attentive to our inner life. While it may be perceived as chaotic and uncertain, prayer allows us to reposition ourselves by letting unified lines resonate. The harmonisation of one's deepest personality allows one to banish the fear of intransigence. The aligned believer calms down and can allow himself to believe that his vital need for consolation is not impossible to satisfy. It is by enhancing one's inner dissonances that one builds one's spiritual being, able to resonate. In this way, one moves towards ever greater harmony, broad, intense, dense. A difficult path, certainly, but one that Salesian thought invites one to practise, without fear, as a devout person (in the 17th century meaning of devout life), in the shadow of the cross, before the face of God.