

LETTING OURSELVES BE LOVED IN OUR FRAGILE INTERIORITY...

Paula Jordão, FMVD

Paula Noronha Jordão, who is from Portugal, is a member of the Verbum Dei Missionary Fraternity.

After completing her studies in Philosophy and Theology at the Verbum Dei Theological Institute, she dedicated herself to evangelisation, through prayer and seeking to live and proclaim the Word of God.

Whilst serving as a Formator, she did a Masters at the School of Formators of the University of Comillas in Salamanca. In recent years she completed a Masters in Spirituality at the Theology Faculty of the Loyola University of Granada. Now, with more than 30 years of experience of missionary life, she is the Formation Coordinator of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG) in Rome.

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Introduction

It is often the case in the spiritual life that we are unaware of the practical and down to earth steps that can make our following of Jesus more possible. We hear about what we should be aspiring to, about what we should avoid doing, but often we hear very little about the 'how to' of following Jesus in our day to day lives. It is not enough to know about the 'what,' we need to articulate more clearly the 'how':

- How can we grow towards loving as Jesus loves us?
- How can we let God's love be stronger than our fears and attachments?
- How can we pray?
- How can we let ourselves be accompanied?
- How can we know ourselves and God better?
- How can we reach freedom in love?

There is an urgent need to map out the paths to enable us to dive into and immerse ourselves in God's constant love: a love that frees us and gives us the capacity to love always, to love generously and to love everyone. By offering tools for self-knowledge, this article seeks to teach us to discover, recognise and open up our fragile inner world to God's loving gaze.

1. Knowing one's self in order to know God and vice versa.

The journey to God necessarily involves the process of getting to know one's self. The great challenge we have in reaching God is not his transcendence, nor even his 'otherness' in relation to ourselves, but rather that our own interiority is a huge mystery to us.

Jesus tells us clearly in the Gospel: "When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is in secret, and your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you" (Mt 6:6). If we take his words seriously, it becomes clear that often what stops us from encountering God is seeking God where God cannot be found. We multiply words and prayers, we seek out many spiritual experiences, we participate in many liturgical acts, we read many spiritual texts, we search arduously, but all the while outside of ourselves.

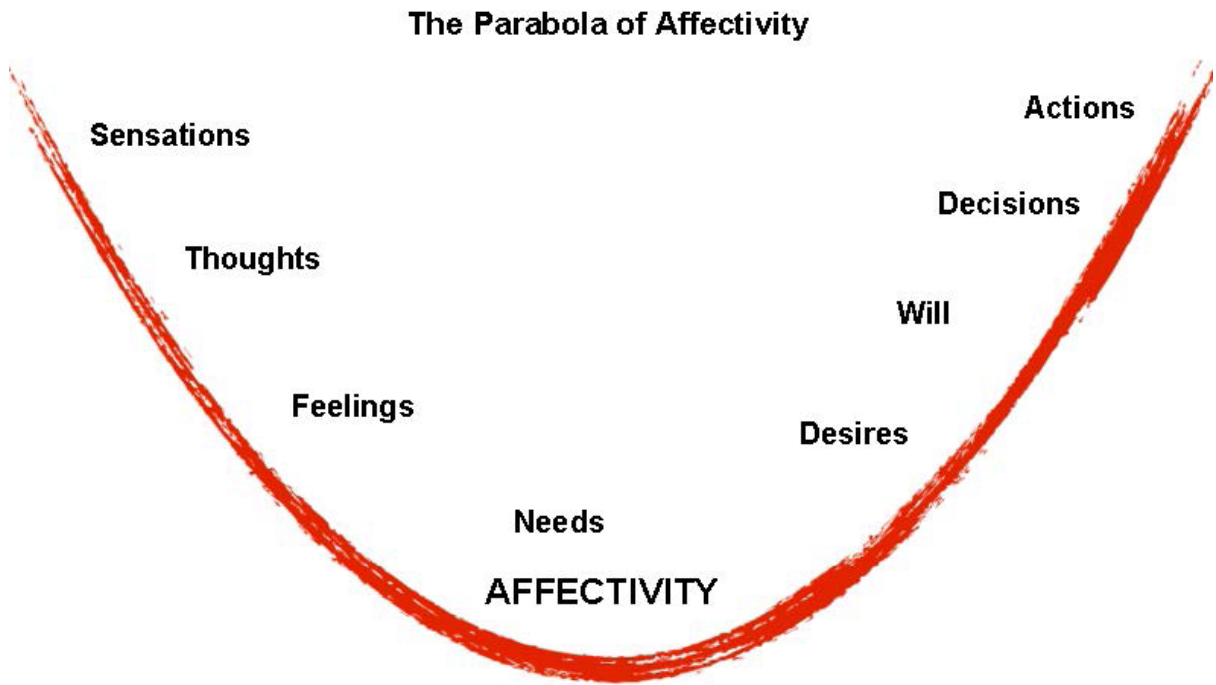
St. Augustine tells us, "Wheresoever you are, wherever you pray. He that hears is within... He that hears you is not beyond you; you have not to travel far, nor to lift yourself up, so as to reach Him as it were with your hands. Rather, if you lift yourself up, you shall fall; if you humble yourself, He will draw near you."¹ St. Teresa of Avila is very clear on this point: "Self-knowledge is the bread with which all delicacies are to be eaten, however delicate they may be, in this way of prayer, and without this bread these delicacies would not be sustaining".²

As consecrated women we are called to be experts in humanity, to know ourselves in order to know the love of God and vice versa. Only in this way can our life be an expression and translation of the love we receive from God on every level. However, we are often confronted with many fears and a loneliness that is difficult to bear: we can feel that we have become strangers to God, to ourselves and to others. The following of Christ becomes arid and burdensome; perhaps because the journey is tough, or because the situations that we accompany are often stark and we touch a lot of suffering around us. But often, if we are honest, we have distanced ourselves from the source of God's love: his Word does not move us, God's voice seems absent and God's love, distant.

As the biblical author reminds us, we may have persevered, we may suffer for his name's sake without growing tired, but we have abandoned our first love (cf. Rev 2:3-4). We do not allow ourselves to be sufficiently loved by God. Like the Samaritan woman, sat by the edge of the well, we doubt that Jesus can quench our deepest thirst: "Lord, you have no bucket, and the well is deep, how could you get this living water?" (Jn 4:11).

2. Our inner world: the 'Parabola' of Affectivity³

The 'parabola' of Affectivity will guide us into our inner world, providing us with an image for our interior in the form of an affective 'well':



2.1. Sensations

The first space within, and to which we must pay attention, is our corporeality. Although our body is the ground of our existence, we often exclude our bodily dimension from our spirituality. It is urgent to root our spiritual life in our bodily experiences, for this union of the spiritual and the corporeal is who we are. Our body is our unique space, our only way to be who we are, to express ourselves, to define our identity and individuality. We communicate with the outside world and with our inner self through the body. All our communication is corporal.

Moreover, the incarnation of Jesus is a radical affirmation of the divine beauty of the human body: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (Jn 1:14). The way that God is revealed in Jesus passes through this body-to-body, face-to-face encounter with each person and with the world around him. Jesus discovered echoes and touches of God in the natural world, like the vineyard, seeds being sown, the soil receiving the seed and in the water of the well, but also in his own body and in the bodies of so many.

To allow God to encounter us with his love, we must be attentive to our own sensations. These are perceptions experienced through the five senses. Our body is the ‘theological locus’ par excellence, that is, the here and now where God manifests himself, communicates his promise and will to us. We must be present to our sensations in order to perceive the sacred messages that God is giving to us. For example:

- the smile of a friend that transmits care and presence;
- the suffering of so many that makes us hunger for justice;
- the illness that makes us search for the meaning of life and confirms our fragility;
- the full moon at night reflecting the sun even when we do not see it, pointing to transcendence;
- the inner turmoil that can be the groaning of the Spirit;
- and so many other bodily experiences that take us beyond ourselves.

Do I realise how God's love reaches me through my body?

2.2. Thoughts

We are configured by our thoughts. Getting to know ourselves involves discovering what we are thinking and our understanding of the world around us, and of ourselves and other people. Our thoughts or way of thinking include: the values and ideals we profess, what we consider to be good or bad, and the norms that govern us. Our way of thinking is one of our supreme human faculties and the extent to which Jesus' Gospel and Kingdom mould our way of thinking is precisely the measure of our acceptance and adherence to Jesus. It is therefore vital to know what we really think in order to become aware of what brings us closer to or further away from the Gospel message.

With this awareness, we need to place our thoughts before God, humbly and sincerely asking not only to know his thoughts that are very different from ours (cf. Is 55:8) but also to transform our way of thinking: "be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good, what pleases him, what is perfect" (Rom 12:2).

We aspire to learn to think like Jesus who thought with a human mind, who let himself be shaped by the Word of God, by God's way of thinking and by God's mercy. In his life, Jesus never allowed himself to be convinced by mistaken ways of understanding religion that lead to discrimination, intolerance, mistreatment or injustice in the name of God (cf. Mt 5:7; 12:7; 23:23).

Even more important is how Jesus understood himself. Jesus' understanding of himself is rooted in the way the Father thought of him: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him" (Mt 17: 5)". He invites us to understand ourselves in the same way. We too are the beloved daughters of God. Jesus also tells us that he loves us with the same love with which he has been loved: "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love" (Jn 15:9).

Has this reality really become my way of thinking to the extent that I believe it and live it?

2.3. Feelings

Beyond our thoughts there is an inner space that cannot be ignored: our feelings. These are inner movements that push us either towards something by attraction, or away from something by rejection, according to what we value as being good or bad. They are, therefore, tendencies that move us to action, but they are not responsible for our actions. Feelings are neither controllable nor voluntary and so cannot be judged morally.

The emotional world frightens us because emotions seem to force themselves on us with excessive strength. In general, in consecrated life, we can be at a loss on how to cope with our feelings. We do not need to be afraid of them, but rather to learn to live with them. The first step is to welcome them, to accept them without judging them morally as good or bad. Then we need to actually feel them. This does not mean doing what they

tell us but rather letting their psychic force and energy express itself without constraint. We need to look for appropriate ways to be in touch with our feelings: writing, painting or drawing, cooking or playing sports, walking in the countryside or listening to music, doing something creative or simply going into a prayerful silence being present to our emotions. Even if they seem to be very strong, we can learn to feel them without obeying or despising them.

A further step is to try to name our feelings and so give them dignity. Often our vocabulary for naming our feelings is limited. We need to give ourselves the words. We can search the internet for a list of feelings and we will see that there are many, many words in our languages that help us to identify them. Simply naming what we feel can give us peace and wholeness.

God meets us also in our emotions when we enter his presence with sincerity. In the pages of the Gospel, we can discover many of Jesus' emotions and the way he welcomed the emotions of others. We remember the woman who touched his cloak from behind in the hope of being healed, although what she was doing was prohibited by the law. When Jesus insisted on knowing who had touched him: "The woman came forward, frightened and trembling, and when she understood what had happened to her, she fell at his feet and confessed the whole truth. He said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has saved you'" (Mk 5: 33-34). In Mk 3:5, the Gospel gives us an insight into the Master's feelings: "He looked around in anger and was grieved because of the hardness of their hearts..."

We may be surprised that Jesus felt anger and pain, but sharing our humanity he also shares our feelings. We rarely look at Jesus from that perspective, but it is essential, so that he can teach us and give us permission to feel with God all the different feelings that are part of our lives.

A further step is to ask where do our feelings come from and where they are tending towards, in order to discern them and receive the information they carry. Only after this process can we then decide what to do.

Lord, do I let you embrace me even with my feelings?

2.4. Needs

Needs are a deeply human and natural reality, but at the same time they are difficult for us to recognise. They can be described both as what we experience as lacking and also as possibilities, our potentiality. We all have needs and capacities that are physical and psychological, personal and social, as well as the need for meaning and transcendence. These needs and capacities cannot be ignored and we must respond to them.

If we find it difficult to be aware of our feelings, very often we are even more out of touch with our needs. Looking for a list of needs, also online, is an important exercise that can give us words to identify our own needs.

Very often our concept of consecrated life is that we should not be thinking of ourselves, but that we should be always focussed on the needs of others. But it is impossible to be attentive and healthily aware of the needs of others if we are not healthily attentive to our own needs. Without realising it, whilst trying to help others we might be unconsciously responding to our own needs, and so instead of helping, end up by manipulating people and situations. It is therefore necessary to have a relationship with our own needs that is transparent and the fruit of reflection.

We are not called to be selfish and self-centred people, but self-aware people learning to respond positively and appropriately to both our own thirsts and those of other people

(cf. Jn 4:7-10). It is essential that we place our needs before God in order to understand how he wants to help us meet and fulfil them.

Jesus experienced our same human needs and was aware of them. He was thirsty, tired, hungry, in need of esteem, friendship, understanding, gratitude and loneliness, among other needs. But he did not shut himself up in his self-centred satisfaction, rather he knew how to prioritise the service of needs, that he had discerned as authentic, both in his own life and that of others.

He invites us to do the same, in the certainty that God always takes care of us, because he meets our needs (cf. Mt 6:8), even when he is inviting us to empty ourselves so that we might be filled with his fullness (cf. Phil 2:5-9).

Jesus, do I discern my needs with you?



2.5. Affectivity

Affectivity is our most central need. We are using this term to describe our capacity and deep need to receive and give love, to let ourselves be loved and to love. This reality is the root of our value as persons. As Christian anthropology tells us, we are created for and by love, and only in love are we fulfilled. It is essential to be aware of the experience of affectivity, in order to know ourselves and to grow as integrated people, daughters of God and sisters of all.

Our affective reality, from our conception until the present moment, shapes our personality and memory, our relationships and mission, our existence and future. The existential questions of our affectivity are present at the centre of our life and in everything we do: are we loved, important, accepted? Is our love valued, useful and recognised? Therefore, we need to regard our affectivity with a positive attitude, recognising with sincerity what is lacking affectively and also recognising what are for us sources of affectivity, so as not

to let ourselves be carried away by obsessions and whims that tempt, betray and trap us, just like the Samaritan woman (cf. Jn 4).

God himself meets us and relates to us affectively, so it is urgent to learn to pray in this affective dimension, letting ourselves to be loved so that God himself empowers us to love. How can this be done?

The first step will always be to recognise our own thirst for love and to love. And then, like Jesus and with him, we must go down to the Jordan or often go up the Mount of Transfiguration to listen to what God also says about us: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him" (Mt 17:5). Or like the "disciple whom Jesus loved" to lay our head on his breast even in the hardest moments when betrayal looms (cf. Jn 13:25), until we come to live the rhythm of the question Jesus asks us: "Do you love me?" responding: "Lord, you know everything, you know that I love you" (Jn 21:15-18).

How can we know ourselves and God better?

Every encounter that Jesus has with someone who believes in his mercy, is an affective encounter; an encounter that reached to the depths of their being, restoring to each person his or her identity before God, before themselves and other people. When the woman secretly touches the hem of Jesus' clothes is an example of such an encounter. Jesus said to her: "Daughter, your faith has saved you. Go in peace and be healed of your disease" (Mk 5:34).

Jesus, today and always, without a doubt, gives us the peace that flows from his very identity, that of being daughters in the Son (cf. Eph 1:5). It is he who liberates us affectively, so that once we let ourselves to be loved we can learn to be free from what imprisons us and holds us back from loving like him always.

Lord, do I let myself be loved by you?

2.6. Desires

Desires are impulses, interests or inner appetites that incite us to action in order to achieve the satisfaction of our needs. They are marked by the sensations that affect us, thoughts that interpret reality, feelings that move us and above all the affectivity that seeks fulfilment.

In the spiritual life, desires sometimes have a bad reputation, as if they were something we must stay away from at all costs. But desires are deeply human. They are the compass that keeps us on course if they are known, discerned and listened to, because they can be a gift and echo of the Spirit. They give colour and life to our decisions because they motivate us to follow the path towards the desired goal even in the midst of difficulties and fatigue. Without them, life - and often especially consecrated life- will be an endless list of rigid and heavy obligations, colourless and emotionless fulfilments. We must dare to desire.

However, neither can we live according to the rhythm of our desires without sobriety and realism, letting them enslave us. Therefore, we must look at them honestly before God in order to learn to know them and to desire well. Jesus teaches us to desire what is good for us without limiting ourselves to what falsely promises to fulfil but ultimately leaves us empty, be it people, things, titles, positions, rules, activities, or vices.

In his life, Jesus experienced desire and made his deep desire into the path to persevere until the end. At the Last Supper, we hear from his lips: "I have longed to eat this Passover with you before I suffer..." (Lk 22:15-16). The words underline an intense longing, that is polarising and total. It was his desire to love his own, to give himself to the end, even if it meant going to the cross, to be a clear expression of the Father's love.

Jesus did not live his life and passion by obedience to rules or external impositions, but by listening and responding appropriately to his own deep desires and, through them, to those of God. Thus, he teaches us not to fear our desires, but to know them, to listen to their invitations, placing ourselves before God so that we can discern where to walk.

Do I dare to desire with God?

2.7. Will

The Christian life seeks the will of the Father: "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Mt 6:9). For this we need to know not only God's will but also our own, in order to conform our will to his.

The will is our capacity to want and to choose the disposition with which we live the different situations of our life, in the face of myriad interior movements and exterior demands. This potential enables us not to follow indiscriminately the rhythm of our instincts and emotions but to choose the direction to take. Our willpower leads us to be faithful even when our feelings, desires or needs insist on pushing us in other directions.

A healthy will enables us to be responsible, free and committed to the Gospel values we profess.

A fragile will runs the risk of volubility. A will that is too strong, however, runs the risk of becoming an inner dictatorship that does not give space to other inner places, creating a personality that is hard and intransigent with itself and with others. Moreover, the will is not enough to determine the inner world. Wanting to control everything by willpower is called Pelagianism and, as Pope Francis reminded us, is not in harmony with our Christian faith.⁴

We need to answer with humility the question: "What do I really want?" and place ourselves before God with open hands like Mary of Nazareth asking: "Let it be done to me according to your word" (Lk 1:38). "For it is God for his own loving purpose, who puts both the will and the action into you." (Phil 2:13). We must kneel before God so that he may strengthen our will and make it more like his will.

Jesus teaches us that, even if our will seems good and holy, we must always discern it and surrender it to the ways of the Father. Let us not forget that self-deception is always present and plays tricks on us. Therefore, with Jesus we learn to say in all situations: "Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me, but not my will but yours be done" (Lk 22:42).

2.8. Decisions

After reflection and wanting, comes the step of decision, the active and practical choosing of the behaviour, attitude, or response we want to give in a specific situation.



Decisions are part of our life at every step and moment. We cannot live without making decisions concerning everything in our lives, both small and great, from the insignificant to the important. When there is a greater number of possible choices, the decision becomes more difficult, but even in the face of this difficulty we need to make a choice, because not to decide is also in itself, a decision. Letting other people decide for us is also ultimately a decision on our part. The experience of obedience cannot mean the absence of decision and self-will.

God invites us to shape our lives through our decisions, that are discerned, creative, realistic and sometimes risky. We need to pause and reflect before our own decisions, to know them and to know ourselves in them: what decisions have I made, why did I decide this, what are the consequences of these decisions? At the same time, we also need to place our decisions – both those that were made well and those not so well made - in the

forge of prayer so that they might be refined and transformed in the light of the promises of God who is always able to make us reconsider and return to the right path, even after bad decisions.

When deciding, it is imperative to consider not only what we are going to do, but also how we are going to do it, because this has an impact in the consequences of the decision. We need to spend time considering the different possible forms and implications that a given decision might have in order to shape it properly. If, for example, I decide to talk to a person, I need to consider and decide on the inner attitude with which to approach the person, the tone of voice, the body language, the content, the words to use, the place, the time, and so on. All these details are fundamental and demand attention.

Jesus invites us to decide in freedom as he did, overcoming all kinds of unjust conventions. He does not coerce us and invites us to do the same, insisting that we are responsible for our lives. Only in a free, voluntary, and firm manner can we live a happy and liberating consecrated life that liberates others in turn. Following him along this path will lead us to embrace the cross, not by accident or by being imposed upon, but out of love, surrendering our own life and will. With him we will be able to say: "The world must be brought to know that I love the Father, and that I am doing exactly what the Father told me" (Jn 14:31).

Knowing the truth about ourselves, which is only given to us through our relationship with God and his Word, will lead us to let ourselves be loved and to love in the way of Jesus.

2.9. Actions

Jesus reminds us: "By their fruits you will know them... A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a damaged tree bear good fruit" (Mt 7:16-18). In the Gospel culture, action is fundamental: the decision is called to become actual. We are built up as persons through the specific actions we take. Through these actions which might also find expression as words and silences, gestures and attitudes, we can recognise our true motivations and the real power that God has in our lives.

The daily sincere and prayerful confrontation of our actions with the life of Jesus helps us to know ourselves, to let ourselves be embraced by his grace, to be strengthened, corrected and step by step to follow him sensitively. The path of salvation takes shape in the details of everyday life: it is precisely in our daily life that Jesus comes to meet us and invites us to love like him.

Jesus calls us to be with him, to follow him and to proclaim him as the vital space of our dedication, our consecration, and our actions (cf. Mk 3:13). The meaning of our Christian life, consecrated since our baptism, is rooted in our being witnesses "to what we have heard, what we have seen with our own eyes, what we have looked upon and touched with our hands" relating to Jesus (1 Jn 1:1). We are to offer to the world - with our gestures and words - the experience of God's love, just as Jesus did: "I have made known to them and will make known to them your name, so that the love you had for me may be in them, and I in them" (Jn 17:26). All this rests on our allowing ourselves to be greatly loved by God who pours his Spirit into our hearts (Rom 5:5).

Conclusion

Jesus' love enables us to love by setting us free: "If you abide in my word, you are my disciples indeed; you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free... And if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (Jn 8:31-32,36).

Knowing the truth about ourselves, which is only given to us through our relationship with God and his Word, will lead us to let ourselves be loved and to love in the way of Jesus. This is the goal of our consecrated life, which only rises by touching our own earth, our *humus*, placing it sincerely and humbly before God who will always strengthen and justify us with his grace: "My grace is sufficient for you: my strength is shown in weakness" (2 Cor 12, 9). This is why we want to enter into our own inner world, which is often so unknown, in order to "let ourselves be loved in our fragile interiority...".

- 1 St. Augustine de Hippo, Tractates on the Gospel of John, Tractate 10, available online, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1701010.htm> (consulted 10th February 2023)
- 2 St. Teresa of Jesus, Libro de la Vida, online , <https://www.portalcarmelitano.org/download/LIBRO-DE-LA-VIDA-Santa-Teresa-de-Avila.pdf> (Consulted 15th September 2020), 13.15. (Source of original Spanish citation)
- 3 Parabola' is the name of the geometric shape in the diagram, particularly suitable to describe interiority.
- 4 Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation Gaudete et exultate: on the call to holiness in today's world, no.49.