

SAVED BY THE EXPERIENCE OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD!

Some reflection points for a possible Salvatorian Theology of Salvation based on John 17, 3

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This reflection intends to offer some keys that might help the reader reach a certain degree of understanding on how the message of salvation is expressed in the Charter of the Salvatorian Family. It is a matter of establishing some common points which will help us to understand, in our present Salvatorian life, the legacy we have received from our Founder, Father Francis Jordan, in regard to that same salvific message we of which we are bearers; and as well, how this message is to be a part of our life as a Family and of our Salvatorian apostolate around the-world.

Continuing to search to establish the “Salvatorian Theology of Salvation” is an arduous and demanding task. We cannot suppose that in few written lines which limit this reflection, it will be over or solved. It will demand great effort, research, as well as the deepening and the capacity for discernment of many Salvatorian men and women who love the Charism and the original strength of our way of being present in the Church. Thus, my only intention is to set the foundation on which a facet of a search for deepening can be based, and to provoke a discussion on the essential dimension of our heritage as well. These questions or intuitions deserve continuous reflection and theological care, so that we can collaborate in our growth as a Salvatorian Family.

1. An inspiring text: Jn 17, 3. To Know God as the Source of Salvation

As we look at the Charter of the Salvatorian Family, our source material for analysis, in the Preface, we find the appeal: “*As long as there is one person on earth who does not know God and does not love God above all things, you dare not allow yourself a moment’s rest.*” (Cf. SD II/1) This well known text of the Spiritual Diary of our Founder establishes an intrinsic relation between our presence in the Church and the mission to lead all human beings to know the only and true God and the one He sent, Jesus Christ (Jn 17, 3). This text opens the First Chapter of the Charter, in which we find the expression of our Call and the Charism. Already in the first article, it tells us: “*Moved by a deep experience of God, the situation of the Church, and the reality of his time, Father Francis Mary of the Cross Jordan was filled with an urgent desire that all people know the one true God and experience fullness of life through Jesus the Savior.*” Thus, it seems impossible for us, members of the Salvatorian Family, to initiate a discussion about the search to establish parameters of interpretation of a Theology of Salvation, if we do not start with the deepening of the profound salvific meaning in the content of the knowledge of God. Honestly, I don’t believe we will even reach a clear notion about our Charism unless we start from that point. So, in these lines, I propose to present some points that will start a reflection about the knowledge of God as the basis for establishing a Salvatorian Theology of Salvation.

2. To Know the Only True God as a founding experience.

Even though there can be much discussion on the importance of certain biblical texts for the understanding of our Charism, we cannot ignore the role and the place that Jn 17, 3 occupies among them. We can hear this biblical verse resounding everywhere and being repeated as a foundational mark from the beginnings of the apostolic activities of Father Francis Jordan and of our existence as a Salvatorian Family. In Jn 17, 3 we can see the inner relationship between *eternal life* and the *knowledge* of the Only True God and Jesus Christ Whom he has sent.

Inserted in the whole of Jesus' Prayer, at the time of his total and absolute surrender for the love of human beings, this verse emphasizes that the fullness of life is given through a profound knowledge of the Father and of His sent One. The knowledge about which John speaks to us is not inserted within a theoretical plan, doctrines or rational explanations about who is the Only and True God¹, but it is a profound experience of a personal encounter with the Lord of life and history. Only by starting from a real and profound encounter based on a love², which implies a relationship with the Lord of History and with the message and witness of His sent One, Jesus, can we understand the wide, true and deepest meaning of life.

That is, in a first and decisive moment, the basis of the knowledge is not framed on the plane of ideas, but on the plane of a fundamental experience. Very insistently, Pope Francis reminds us that this personal experience of encountering the Savior, with his friendship and the assurance of being saved by Him, brings a gushing joy to the heart and the firm decision to go ahead always. Thus, the ongoing renewal of this basic experience helps us to see that “... *it is not the same thing to have known Jesus as not to have known him, not the same thing to walk with him as to walk blindly, not the same thing to hear his word as not to know it, and not the same thing to contemplate him, to worship him, to find our peace in him, as not to.*”³

It is something so remarkable, personal, experiential and transformative, that it allows us to always feel the presence of the Master in our own existence, as a companion journeying along on the roads of life.

To experience the encounter with Jesus, and not be his follower only because we've heard about Him, is the fundamental premise for establishing an intimate relationship with Him, like the experience reported by the people of the town where the Samaritan Woman announced her experience of the encounter with the Lord. She empowers the people's profession of faith: He is the Savior of the World! (Jn 4, 28-42)

A first and basic point in establishing a salvific perspective of our Salvatorian action lies in this capacity to allow all those who meet us realize their encounter with Jesus as a person, thus having a grounding experience of dialoguing with the Master and listening to His word. However, in order to do this, before anything else, we, ourselves, need to meet the Savior, not in theory only, but in the experience of being saved by Him, immersing ourselves “*in the ocean of love of your God*” (cf. SD I/150*) as our Founder has said. Can all of us, members of the Salvatorian Family, affirm and recapture in our life this fundamental experience that is the basis of salvation?

3. An experience of encounter with others which generates a process

The existential encounter of two persons happens in freedom. The encounter happens in the same way between the human being and God. La Peña affirms so well, that “...*to believe and to have the experience of freedom is the same and unique thing*”.⁴ The reciprocal relationship

¹ MASHILA, Sr. Justine Mbuyi. “*THE SALVATORIAN CONCEPT OF SALVATION IN THE CONTEXT OF JOHN 17,3*”. In: Salvatorian Key Elements 2, p. 54. Regarding this point, see QUEIRUGA. O.T., To Recuperate the Salvation, p.13. The author reminds that at the decisive time the ideas concerning the transcendence of the Word of God, has to be left aside in order to go into the area of beliefs, that means, of the basic principles determining our options. Comblin reminds us that beyond the philosophical and scientific discussion of accessing the knowledge of God, marked by the logic and by the concept formally established, there is the knowledge of life. The latter is synthetic, integral, free, narrative and, above all, a vital knowledge; in other words, experiential. Cf. COMBLIN, J. *Vocação para a liberdade*, p.58-62. After all, the Incarnation event is not an abstract theory, but a concrete historical fact that makes us affirm that we know God through the recognition of His Incarnation in the human Jesus— Cf. LA PEÑA, J.L. *v Criação, Graça, Salvação*, p.52.

² *Ecumenical Translation of the Bible*, p.2083, note w.

³ POPE FRANCIS. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 266. Regarding this point see also numbers 01.03.04.264.

⁴ LA PEÑA, J.L.R. *op. cit*, p.48. See also p.46.

between divinity and humanity is established in the freedom of a face-to-face relationship that approaches and communicates⁵. God looks at the human person, who is created in and for love, and finds in that person an interlocutor, a free person who is responsible for his/her own choices, able to say no to his/her Creator. God establishes a dialogue with the person in freedom; God deposits hope in this human being hoping that the person will become a co-creator, responsible for the future of creation.⁶ The person looks at Jesus and finds in Him an inspiring model, which allows self-understanding, since God in revealing Himself allows us to be able to realize who we are in a better way. The revelation of God always refers to the reality of the human being⁷, because God reveals Himself ultimately by revealing us to ourselves.⁸ Isn't this the same reason that the Divine Savior is the center of our lives as Salvatorians, the inspiring model and the reason for our being and presence in the world? The first part of the article 10 of the Charter, affirms: "*Lived in the real world, our personal and communal spirituality is rooted in our experience of God the Father. Jesus Christ, who came to give life to all, is the Source and the Center of our spirituality.*" Clearly expressed: our experience of a free and conscious encounter makes Jesus the center and the inspiring model of our being and acting.

In fixing our eyes on Jesus who looks at us, we let ourselves to be transformed by this look and discover a double divine-salvific movement in ourselves: God descends, comes to us, wanting to communicate with us, taking the initiative in His loving grace, not to keep us there where we are, but making us ascend to Him. That is, God comes down to us in order to take us up to Himself, so that we can go advancing to what we are supposed to be, if He becomes the center and the model of our lives. This ascending movement, the encounter with the fullness of life that the Savior announces and gives to us as His message and witness, is eternal life. Salvation means to reach the fullness of what we can be as human beings, inspired in Jesus the Savior.⁹ I propose in a very simple way, to verify two biblical examples of this double fold divine movement: the liberation from Egypt and the Incarnation.¹⁰

In the Book of Exodus, when God calls Moses to collaborate with the project of liberation for the people enslaved in Egypt, the textual formula used indicates this movement: "*I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry of complaint against their slave drivers, so I know well what they are suffering. Therefore I have come down to rescue them from the hands of the Egyptians and lead them out of that land into a good and spacious land...*"¹¹ Knowing the situation of the people, the movement which God wants to establish with Moses' collaboration is very interesting. It is not about a pure and simple intervention. It is a descending movement that rises up. Although, at first, it might seem to be a sociological rising from one land to another, **the experience** will prove that it refers to a raising up in a more profound way: a way of constituting a people truly free, around the Law and the Word of the Lord.

In the same perspective, in the dynamic of the Incarnation, as the Apostle Paul presents to us, Jesus emptied himself, descended to us, assuming the condition of a slave, coming in human likeness even to the cross. **Descending**, God **raises** him up, making him Lord, before whom

⁵ Idem, p.35.53.59.

⁶ SEGUNDO, J.L. *Que mundo? Que homem? Que Deus?*, p.477 e *Libertação da Teologia*, p.168.

⁷ Idem. *O Dogma que Liberta*, p.134.

⁸ Cf. QUEIRUGA, O.T. *A revelação de Deus na realização humana*, p.10.

⁹ LA PEÑA. *op.cit*, p.10.14.60-61. Check also: DE MIER, F. *Salvados e Salvadores*, p.216-217; LADARIA, L.F. *Jesucristo, salvación de todos*, p.15-16.25-26.

¹⁰ I believe that this is an issue that needs continuing study and deepening, which will inspire us much in the understanding of our way of being and acting as Salvatorian.

¹¹ Cf. Ex. 7-8b. I follow the text of the Jerusalem Bible. The underlining is mine.

every knee should bend.¹² For having descended and assumed our nature, enslaved by sin and limitation, and being obedient to death on a cross, Jesus is raised up as the first of all human believers. In Jesus, rising is more than ever an anthropological rise, of a model of humanity. Jesus becomes for us a model for what we as human beings can come to be, if we assume the consequences of this experiential encounter with him and enter the way of salvation reaching the heart of God.¹³

4. An experience that launches us into the adventure of a growth process

The immediate consequence of this transforming encounter with God, i.e. by immersing ourselves in the experience of God's love in a free and enveloping relationship and in recognizing the double movement of his saving action, is to place ourselves in the dynamics of constant growth in order to seek to become the best of ourselves. The dynamics of this ascending movement require from us a continuous effort of confrontation with the one true God¹⁴, and the proper overcoming of ourselves.

The first effort to be undertaken means overcoming self-preferentiality and allowing Jesus to be our reference and inspiring model, which is well known to all members of the Salvatorian Family. As Pope Francis so well expresses himself, about this free encounter between God and the human being, "... *we are liberated from our narrowness and self-absorption. We become fully human when we become more than human, when we let God bring us beyond ourselves in order to attain the fullest truth of our being.*"¹⁵ Journeying towards the unity of humanity dreamed of by God, we are constantly formed as we come face-to-face with our exemplar, as were the apostles. And, in this process we become equipped to be apostles. This dynamic of missionary formation-action that the apostles experienced with the Master Jesus - - is this not the model proposed to us for our present formation as disciples of the Savior and as apostles in the world today? Thus, in this vital and ongoing communication, the human Adam meets the human Christ with and the possibility is born of constant continually overcoming the Adam's human structure towards in search of his, the Christic destiny¹⁶, constantly surpassing himself in the time that limits him which requires the capacity for transcendence. From the moment we get come to know God and enter His dynamic of rising, we assume that we are beings in continuous formation, constantly overcoming ourselves, in search of growth. This process is salvation because, through it, we are invited to enter into a dynamic of learning until reaching maturity in faith¹⁷. Salvation, thus, is not a unique moment and given once for all. It is a process established through the encounter with the Savior Who calls us to go deeply into the dynamic of salvation, constantly overcoming ourselves.¹⁸

5. Concluding one step of the way

¹² Cf. Phil 2,6-11.

¹³ *Evangelli Gaudium*, n.178

¹⁴ This definition of the only and true God would require a deeper study in itself that can contribute much to the salvific understanding from the Salvatorian perspective.

¹⁵ *Evangelli Gaudium*, n.08. The awareness about the personal growth process started from the encounter with Jesus pervades the Encyclical; Just check numbers 11.151.153.160.161.171 e 203. It's worth highlighting the perspective of the process to be established in this growing process – see numbers 222-224 (where the consciousness of time is superior to the concept of space, asking from us the capacity to generate the timing process) and the need to overcome the limitations and conflicts within the humankind itself – see numbers: 226-230.263.277.

¹⁶ LA PEÑA, *op.cit*, pp.35-36. 49. Regarding this point, see also: DE MIER, F, *op. cit*, p.96-97.

¹⁷ This point, for me, it seems to be the most important for us and would merit a study aside, stressing the understanding of this process of continuous formation, like the Apostles, so appreciated by the Founder.

¹⁸ Cf. MIER, Francisco de, *op.cit*, p.98.

If whatever we want to express briefly is correct, in a deepest way possible, from the point of historical limitation that characterizes every human being, we have reached only a step of the way we have to tread in order to meet a Salvatorian Theology of Salvation.

We have done nothing more than trace a possible profile of the path that deserves continually to be trod, visited and revisited. What is important is the deepening of the awareness that salvation, from the text of Jn 17,3, as an experiential knowledge of an encounter with the unique and true God requires from us, in an ongoing learning process, an exciting, risky and provoking adventure of penetrating God's very salvific dynamic.

The adventure of searching to deepen the relationship between salvation and our Charism has been launched. May more and more members of the Salvatorian Family venture along this path and help us all grow in awareness of the beauty and centrality of this message.

Reflection Questions

1. Re-read the Salvatorian Family Charter in light of this article.
 - Note words or phrases that speak to you and ask: "What is this saying to me and how will I respond?"
 - What could be some implications for the Salvatorian Family in your area of the world, and/or globally?
2. In light of this article, if you were to revise the Salvatorian Family Charter, what would you add or change?
3. As a member of the Salvatorian Family, can you identify in your life, this transforming experience of encounter with God?
4. On the basis of this article, what elements allow you to recognize the Divine Savior as the center of your life?
5. Which of the reflections above give you incentive for your Salvatorian mission?

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