

*Scylla and Charybdis*¹:

NOTES ON GOING THROUGH THE CRISIS

I propose a small reflection on the possible meaning of the crisis, aware that many crises exist on a personal, community and collective level. I immediately refer to a beautiful speech by Pope Francis – given on 21 December 2020 - on the biblical sense and spiritual meaning of the crisis: in that beautiful text he recounts the crisis as an event that sooner or later touches everyone, individuals, communities, institutions. For Pope Francis, it is a delicate moment, one of extreme vulnerability, but also one of possible evolutions, openings, growth: 'God continues to make the seeds of his Kingdom grow among us.'²

I have, therefore, given a lot of thought as to how to set up this brief speech, which I would like to be direct, to the point, and not abstract. I believe that every speech ultimately stems from an experience because every profound experience in some way moves us, changes us, influences us. Over the last few years, I have been doing a good part of my work as a teacher - and as a theologian - in prison, so I would like to speak here with you and to you, Roma and non-Roma, starting from my experience in this place so difficult and so dear to me.

I think it may be useful to follow the work and experience done with classes and groups of inmates in the prison in my city, not so much because it is an exemplary experience, but because I think it is important to reflect here on the crisis from a concrete ground. If anyone is interested, I also recommend a documentary - *Dustur*, which means Constitution in Arabic - made by a friend, on the kind of work that takes place in prison.

Starting from these experiences, I have identified, in a very broad manner, some stages that I believe can be applied to different personal and communitarian, ecclesial and social spheres. I have thus divided the reflection into a number of steps, including a final one to be considered as a horizon, aware that "life is superior to the idea" and that these are only some possible research paths, without any claim to thoroughness, but with the desire to open up reflections. In order to inspire the conversation in the coming days, I take the liberty of introducing each stage with brief quotations, most of which are from Etty Hillesum, a Jew woman persecuted, imprisoned and then murdered in the 1940s, adding a few footnote texts and, finally, concluding each step with a question. I hope these will be useful.

"Lord each one of us is at one of your frontiers [...] we had thought that all countries were marked on maps and that the black lines indicating railways and boats were enough to go from one to the other. Living among men, we learnt the opposite. If there are maps in extension, there should be maps in depth' (M. Delbr  l, *Missionaries without a boat* - on the occasion of the departure of missionaries from the port of Le Havre 1943)

The starting ground

¹ The name is only present in the German and French versions and refers not only to the Strait of Messina in the Odyssey tale, but also to the two arms of the Reggio Calabria prison. The previous name of this report is *Liberi dentro*, i.e. that of a small project with a radio - and a video channel - for the city and for the prison at its centre, which was launched in the days of the violent uprisings of spring 2020 inside several prisons: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCZR4jXNnQa4zbkhpL2JycTQ>

² https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2020/december/documents/papa-francesco_20201221_curia-romana.html

I start my reflection - as a first step - by describing the type of work we do with a group of young researchers, male and female, with the students of some high school classes in a large prison in Northern Italy. These are classes of detainees, including: classes of high security, i.e. people linked to mafia; classes of medium security with many different offences in terms of seriousness and length of sentence (there are, for example, some very young people already serving life-long sentences); one class of protected detainees, i.e. detainees accused of sex crimes against women and children; finally a class - very beautiful and lively - of women with extremely diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

What do we do? In these classes, as part of our school teaching, we read classical texts (Antigone, the Iliad, the Odyssey, some fables by Luis Sepulveda, some books from the Bible - such as Jonah - with also Koranic verses, several poems) trying to understand these texts together, through the help of 'philosophical' questions about life, choices, justice and injustice. In short, we are looking for questions and answers to help us read the personal and collective crisis that people in the classroom are going through, hoping to get from this reading some keys to read our collective crises. This is really - to use Paulo Freire's words - a work 'with': we reflect together with students and young people - students and researchers - in a strange, but often extremely lively, questioning and sometimes a dramatic research community. It seems to us that such work is very rich because it is situated on a social frontier (who is in and who is out) but above all because it is situated on many frontiers of human life (between despair and hope, between violence and peace, between radical injustice and the restoration of justice, between giant solitudes and the search for human support, between humiliation and dignity). Perhaps - but this is only a hypothesis - in order to try to understand each crisis, one must try to observe and understand it from a 'frontier' zone, from some 'margin'³.

What is my/our context? What are the frontiers on which we stand?

"Should not the spirit continue to work and be creative even when the body is sick? And love and *hineinhorchen* [listen within] oneself, others, the context of this life, and you. *Hineinhorchen*, I would like to find a good Dutch translation of this word. Basically, my life is an uninterrupted listening within myself, others, God [...]. The most essential and profound part of me listening to the most essential and profound part of the other' (E. Hillesum, 17 September 1942)

Trying to understand what happens

A second stage in our work is to read the texts together. The texts - like reality - need time to be understood, to understand who the characters are, their personality, their way of behaving. On top of that, it is very important to take the time to understand the words used: many students are non-Italian, there are many Slavs, Arabs and Africans, several South Americans, so Italian words sound difficult to them and appear to have different meanings. We thus need time to understand the meanings of the words, then what happens, why the characters behave in a certain way, what feelings are at play in the stories and what feelings are aroused by the story in our small classrooms (which sometimes take place with the screams and noises of the prison in the background). Another point: for all those who visit our workshops, appears a strong difference between the men's and women's sections. Their questions and answers are different, the way of feeling is richer, the

³ J.M. BERGOGLIO, "Criteria for Apostolic Action", in Id. *Pastorale sociale*, edited by M. GALLO, Jaca Book, Milan 2015, 63: 'A work loses its apostolic vigour when it is incapable of turning apostolically towards the frontier and consequently when it does not know how to gather within itself the problems and the people that are part of this frontier'.

contact with feelings more direct, the emotion and tears - compared to the ostentatious harshness of the men's contexts - more immediate: the reading - and the reality - is thus profoundly different for men and for women. It seems a trivial observation, but we know it is not: the male point of view appears there for what it is, just a partial point of view. Reading together thus takes a lot of time and I believe it is the operation that every relationship with reality requires, that is, *looking for little clues and signals* that help to decipher what is happening in the story, in reality, in me, in us.

How do we work on trying to understand what is happening? What are the signs that question us now?

"There is a difference between *tempered* and *hardened*. It is often overlooked today. [...] *Tempered* distinguishes it from *hardened*" (E. Hillesum, 28 July 1942, 8.30 p.m.)

Searching for words

A third stage can be described by a poem by a dear friend - which I enclose as a note⁴ - which has as its refrain *I search for words*. This is the work we do together to *give the word*, to find the right words to describe what is happening in the story, but very often this search results in recounting - sometimes with great anger, sometimes with wisdom and a desire for redemption, sometimes with defeated resignation - the situation of the people in the classroom. For example, the journey of Ulysses becomes a metaphor for the journey into prison and the infernal gears of justice. The distance from Ithaca is interpreted as the symbol of the cooling - dramatic for many - of relations with their wives and children, which comes after long years of imprisonment and thinned out contacts (a few weeks ago a woman from Nigeria told us that for years - before mobile phones - in order to give news to her mother without a landline in the village, she used to record long audio cassettes with her own news which she then sent to Africa). Ulysses' affairs with other women provided an opportunity to talk about the betrayals suffered by their men. For many - listening to Ulysses' return to Ithaca - the question of not simply returning home emerges, not only because of the long years inside the prison, but questions such as: who will I be to my children? What will I find? What will my relationship with my partner be like after ten, twenty, thirty years in a prison? It is the stage where we look for the right words to describe what is happening. It is a complex stage, one that sometimes defies despair and cynicism, because often it gives the impression that "all words are exhausted/tired/empty" (Qo 1:8). Sometimes one has to go through this phase in which every word seems empty, worthless, in order to be able to regain words full of meaning or in

⁴ "Landed pigeons rummage among the leaves of January the dismayed robin invokes the lost snow the woodpecker and the jay scrutinise trees to plunder the curly-haired woman on the bench search for meaning to the novel reading the old man calls the escaped dog

I search for words

to narrate the havoc
of faces and names
of gestures and desires
of sketches and dreams
on earth as it is in heaven

I search for words

To subtract them in the corrosive light
and wrap them in the cloth of silence
and lay them down in the shrine of slowness
and the shrine in the cavern of time
where the silver fountain
fossil water
of the land spring' (M. Mattarelli, *Almeno la notte*, Bologna 2016).

a very nice English expression: *words that make sense*. If one somehow manages to get around this barrier of 'it's all useless', 'they are all the same', 'it all sucks', a new task opens up.

In fact, on a personal level, each one is engaged in searching for the words that he/she feels are right for him/her, to find an interpretation with some meaning of the story of his/her life. This, on the level of working together, means helping each other to find suitable words that are not just an outburst of pain, decompensation and anger [sometimes this is the case], but words that are an expression of a sustained pain, words that are not closed, i.e. words-tombs with which to feel one's life as buried, but open words. One often feels in this work that there is a difference, in the long years spent in prison, between being hardened and made numb and being tempered, somehow matured. It is a difficult and delicate work, in which amidst various mistakes and tensions, one struggles to find words that help one not shutting oneself in, but to orient oneself in a dark situation towards some light.

What words do we search for? What realities are most indecipherable to us?

"Within me there is an ever-deepening silence. So many words lap this silence up, they are tiring because they cannot express anything. One must increasingly spare useless words in order to find the few that are necessary" (E. Hillesum 25 July 1942)

Word and silence

A fourth stage can probably be found in the search not only for words, but also in the search for silence. Here I mean two things. A collective space in which one can read, reason and reflect together with others, a space sheltered - at least a little - from the violence, tension and noise of prison. A letter from last summer - from a young prisoner on complex mafia-related charges - said: 'it was a pleasure to have met you but above all to share our emotions after reading the texts, and believe me, in certain contexts, the mind becomes free again for a few hours, and for all of us it does so much'. Such work seems to help people seeking a little inner - and collective - space in which to weigh things and feelings up and in which it's possible to share with others.

I believe that place corresponds to the heart of which Scripture often speaks, in heart one keeps, compares, and evaluates the things that are happening in order to try to understand their meaning⁵. This is done in prison with great delicacy and care because often for people in a detention center - but perhaps not only there - intimacy is inhabited by gigantic pain and fatigue, by anger and violence suffered and acted upon, by recent and ancient melancholies. The heart is really a delicate place, and therefore one must be careful in inviting one to come back into oneself and to dialogue with oneself; at the same time, it seems to us to be an essential step in order to make a progress/a way and perhaps to find inner resources. An ancient poet - and a recent poetess - speak of a kind of spring of the heart, of a *coolness in the centre of the chest* that one must somehow dig up⁶. Very

⁵ Luke 2:19: "Mary, on her part, kept all these things, pondering them in her heart/□□□□ □□□□□□□□ τὰ □□□□□□ □□□□□ □□□□□□□□ □□ τῇ καρδίᾳ □□□□□." □□□□□□□□□□ □□

⁶ "There are two types of intelligence: one acquired how the schoolchild memorises facts and concepts from books and what the teacher says, accumulating information from traditional sciences, as from the new ones.

With this intelligence you emerge in the world
you place yourself in front or behind others
based on your competence in memorising
information, with this intelligence you walk around
for the fields of knowledge marking more and more
as in your notebook.

often the inmates themselves seek this place, dedicating space - especially in the evenings and at night - to writing, reading and composing poetry, writing very long letters, diaries, drawings and very often writing narratives of their lives. That particular crisis that is the life inside a prison has a great need for interiority, for a place of silence and guarded/cherished word.

What cultivation of interiority? What space for the word and silence? What resources can such a space - of silence and guarded words - provide for recognising and traversing crises?

"My heart is a lock that every time stops
an uninterrupted flow of pain" (E. Hillesum, 17
September 1942)

Searching for answers for 'the end of the world'

A fifth stage, which is extremely complex, is the gradual and discontinuous surfacing/arising by some of the detained students of numerous traumas. Traumas of which one has been the actor and traumas of which one has been or is the victim. It is an extremely delicate subject that we cannot go into here. But we can say that in the readings together a number of issues emerge, let us recall just a few: a first issue concerns the relationship with one's family - when there is one - with one's children, parents, partners. It is the theme of home, of longing to return, of detachment from a beloved world. A detained student - always very much on his own and originally from the Iran-Turkey border - in a recent dialogue in a class spoke of how his relationship with his wife and young daughter after several years in prison is like broken glass, difficult to repair, ruined forever. I think we are really talking here about the broken heart that the psalms and scriptures often deal with⁷. A second theme that often emerges is the end of a world, of one's own world, many people tell in our meetings about the first days in prison when it seems to you that the world has come crashing down - I think precisely in the apocalyptic sense of which Matthew 24 speaks - or others tell of the day of sentencing, the day they heard the word 'life-imprisonment' or hearing their description as 'murderer', as 'dangerous criminal'. It really is the end of a world, of one's own world, which leads to a great bewilderment, to a wavering of many certainties, to 'feeling lost'. A few days ago, a student said that he would like to meet Tiresias, the blind soothsayer, sometimes a man, sometimes a woman, who tells the truth in the Greek tragedies and in the Odyssey, in order to be able to answer the question 'who am I?'

Crisis always involves a passage through some 'end of the world', a redefinition of self, which is indeed a very hard and uprooting test, inside and outside prison. In our work together we try, through reading and joint discussion of the texts and aware that in the background there are these traumas, to seek some element of response. A beautiful study was recently published - *Holy Resilience. The Traumatic Origins of the Bible* - on the fact that, on closer inspection, even the Hebrew and Christian Bible, in many of its parts, can be read as a series of responses to trauma, to guilt, to the end of a world. One example - and a recommended reading - concerns the moving story of Rabbi Kalonymus Shapira (Grodzisk 1889 - Trawniki concentration camp 1943), whose speeches and short biography have recently been published. He was a rabbi of the Warsaw ghetto during the years of the Nazi occupation and the final solution. His texts - buried in the days of the ghetto and rediscovered at the end of the war - testify to an attempt to sustain the hope and faith of

There is another type of notebook
One already complete and enshrined within you,
a spring overflowing from its bed. A *coolness*
in the centre of the chest. This other intelligence
does not yellow or stagnate. It is fluid,
and its movement is not from outside to inside
through the pipes of hydraulic knowledge.

This second knowledge is a source

that from within you goes outwards' (Rumi quoted in C. L. Candiani, *Ma dove sono le parole?*, Milan 2015, 14-15)

⁷Cf. Ps 147:3: "Heal the afflicted [broken] hearts and bind up their wounds".

the Jews of his community in a dark and hellish situation, continually questioning the meaning of the suffering and trauma they endured. With a very firm faith and intense searching of the Scriptures, he spoke of human tears, of God's tears, of the Lord's absence and the hidden presence of his kingdom. Perhaps not only the Bible, but also its interpretation is often - also - a search for an answer to personal, collective and epochal traumas⁸.

What crises - personal and collective - represent the end of our world? How and where to find the answers to get through them?

"One must always be willing to review one's life, to start all over again in a different place" (E. Hillesum 27 July 1942)

"For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your peace and not for harm, to give you a future with hope" (Jer 29:11)

The possibility of reconsideration

A sixth stage is something unfathomable that sometimes appears and reveals itself. I call it rethinking, i.e. when it happens that in working together one glimpses - admittedly through very long, often karstic paths - a certain willingness to reconsider one's life. It is a threshold that when crossed becomes perceptible, i.e. when people inside rethink their lives and through anger, denials, endless guilt feelings rethink their ways with a desire for change. It seems to me that this mode often manifests itself as a shift from an idea of destiny - a word that is in any case central in many religious and/or mythical Mediterranean cultures - to an idea of personal responsibility. What has happened, the crisis one goes through, the crisis one has caused are now in some way linked to choices. This is a very delicate event that has to do with being in touch with oneself, with important affections, with intellectual paths that broaden horizons, with the exercise of reading and critical thinking, in a more secular vision this means being touched by what touches one in an *ultimate* way - *the ultimate concern* (P. Tillich) - in a Christian and religious vision this can be described as the action of grace, of a "gentle light" (J.H. Newman), the grace of being able to rethink one's life. A few months ago, talking about Ulysses' encounter with - again - the soothsayer Tiresias who is able to see the future, I asked a class if any of them wanted to know their future in advance. After a heated debate, one prison student, who usually does not speak much, said: 'knowing the future does not interest me, but I would like to change some things about my past'. Here it seems to me that this is one of those signs of a movement indicating a desire to face one's life, to unearth/dig up goodness and hope. Here I am often helped in deciphering these passages with students by an understanding of the future found in Arjun Appadurai - and also in Ivan Illich - in his work with the slum dwellers of Mumbai: there is a way of conceiving the future that is that of *prediction*, of calculation on the basis of current premises (and if this is the case for many, hopes are powerfully reduced), and there is a way of feeling and conceiving the future that is that of *open possibility*, of possible futures (which opens up new ways and - small - path of hope)⁹.

⁸ C. Chalier, *Kalonymus Shapira Rabbi nel ghetto di Varsavia*, Giuntina, Florence 2014 and K. Shapira, *Nuovi responsi di Torah nei giorni dell'ira*, Giuntina, Florence 2023.

⁹ Cf. '[...] it is discouraging. And yet I maintain that if we do not oppose to all this a strong and luminous alternative with which we can begin anew in an altogether different place, then we are lost once and for all. I will be able to rediscover access to this new, radiant source' (E. Hillesum 27 July 1942) and "One day someone said: *you will always have the poor with you*; not to resign yourself to the worst, but to invent, with human attention and dedication, something that helps you to live, to breathe, to hope; so that you can look at each other without fear, without shame, without bitter undertones, but with that 'will to good' that is ultimately the expression of the only resistant and convincing and courageous hope" (P. Serrazanetti, Bologna 2003).

What are the predictions about our future? Where/how do we look for possible futures?

"When will the kingdom of God come?"

He answered them: "The kingdom of God does not come in such a way as to attract attention, and no one will say, 'Here it is,' or, 'There it is.' For, behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst!" (Lk 17:21)

An underlying horizon

This last statement on the existence of future possibilities opens up a final reflection. Despite the fact that our activity is carried out in a secular and interreligious manner, without denominational attitudes, the perspective that underpins this work is that of a profound connection - albeit hidden or karstic - between an existential set of questions and the message of the Gospel. This perspective is succinctly and, I believe, very clearly summarised in a note by the young Bergoglio commenting on a text - the account of a dream - by the German theologian Romano Guardini: "this night as dawn was breaking, when dreams usually come, I began to have one. What happened in the dream I no longer know, but something was said, and I do not know whether it was said to me or about me. And it was said that when a man is born he is given a word and this has a very important meaning: it is not just a capacity or an aptitude, but it is a word. This word is spoken within himself (*Wesen*), but it is a *password* (*Passwort*) for everything that happens. It is both strength and weakness. It is a task and a gift. It is a security/protection and a risk. Everything that happens as the years roll by is the translation of this word, it is its clarification, it is its realisation. And all this happens so that he to whom this word was spoken (every man is told a word) may understand it and live by it. And perhaps this word will be the basis (the support) of what the Judge will one day say to him'. Bergoglio notes: 'here we find a reference to a nostalgia aroused by the first Word that was spoken (which means that it was announced). So, we have an *existential kerygma* prior to the evangelical *kerygma* and on which the evangelical *kerygma* is rooted. What does this existential *kerygma* look like? This existential *kerygma-word* is given to man. His life is an adventure of encounters, losses and re-encounters with life itself. The moments in which a kind of inner 'consonance' is realised relate to encounter, those that relate to 'dissonance' are moments of seeking and non-encounter. Here too we have a basis for theological consolation (example of consonance) and desolation (dissonance). The central word is nostalgia. This word, then, has a history: it is historical [...]. The myth that best represents both reunion and return is that of Ulysses: the *nostos-algos* [the pain of returning home] in that context is clear. His whole journey is not to accept the 'words' that are not the word'. With this last hint at a profound dialogue between the fundamentals of life and the gospel - between biographies and the hidden action of the kingdom of God - I hope I have clarified, at least a little, the meaning of our work. I also believe that such a common effort to read important stories together in an attempt to bring out the junctures of our stories - of people inside and outside the prison - is a possible help in the search for new perspectives and possibilities to traverse our lives and crisis.