

Third Lenten Conference at the Heart of Mary Shrine, Carvalhos, Pedroso Vila Nova de Gaia - March 12, 2023

The Challenges of the Mystery of Love

Dr. Guilherme Abreu

On March 12, 2023, on an afternoon that was already announcing spring, more than one hundred people gathered in the Claret Auditorium of the Heart of Mary Shrine, in Carvalhos, to attend the third Lenten Conference, which had as a speaker the clinical psychologist Dr. Guilherme Abreu who presented a reflection on the theme "The challenges of the loving mystery".

As usual the session started with a song, this time sung and played by the couple Mariana and Leandro, whose refrain was linked to the topic of the session: "I can go far beyond where I am, by putting on the wings of the Lord

This was followed by the presentation of the speaker by Dr. Ricardo Matias, who after a brief curriculum summary of the speaker, gave him the floor.

Dr. Guilherme Abreu started by thanking the invitation and made a brief preamble in which he referred the theme of the previous conference about the role of women in the Church, to indicate that his journey in the faith was accompanied by the motivation and support of some women who marked his life. Moving on to the theme, she began by referring to the etymology of the words which make up the expression "loving mystery", since in Greek the word "mystery" is associated with the meaning "secret ceremony" and the word "loving" has a good translation in the expression from Luís de Camões: "fire that burns without being seen". Both unite in the idea of invisible, hidden, that which is not seen, that which is not directly attainable. This idea marked the connecting thread of the whole communication. From it he recalled the reading that is heard in the liturgy of Ash Wednesday, in which Jesus advises prayer in the intimacy of the secret place, and referred to the book of Pope Benedict XVI (written before his papal investiture) - "Introduction to Christianity" which refers to the "material gravity" of people, that is, the human tendency to focus on the tangible, which has to be overcome by faith if we want to penetrate the mystery. And God is mystery... He stressed that faith has as its central element a link to the hidden, to what is invisible, and therefore requires a "turning" (in Benedict XVI's expression) towards the invisible, referring also to what Jesus said to Thomas: "Blessed are those who believe without having seen" (John 20:29). Also the faithful in the Creed say: "Creator of all things, visible and invisible". From this he concluded that a characteristic of love is a corporeality of something that cannot be seen.

At this point, Dr Guilherme Abreu warned that his words should not be interpreted as if the visible was not important, and in this regard he recalled what is written in the Book of Genesis when God finishes the creation of the world: "God saw that it was good" (Gen 1:21). Jesus himself was not only a spiritual being, but Man and God, so the visible form is also important. For the speaker, faith is the bridge that connects the visible and the invisible, the concrete and the mystery, contradicting the Manichaeon vision that put the emphasis on the spirit, despising the body. Quoting the writer Gilbert Keith Chesterton, the speaker stressed that "there is a real bridge between the spirit and reality" and that, from his point of view, that bridge is faith. Therefore, he sees it as a Christian's obligation to give soul to reality through faith.

Following these ideas, Dr Guilherme de Abreu explained that the purpose of faith is to link the visible with the invisible, which allows us to find a meaning to existence. From this point of view, he stated that this gives faith a salvific capacity, since finding meaning gives the will to live. In this regard he quoted Benedict XVI, in the work mentioned above, and the philosopher Socrates, saying respectively: "Meaning is the bread that the human being lives by in the essence of his being" and "A life without a search is not worthy of being lived. He then recounted the experience of Carl Gustav Jung (who had a relationship with Sigmund Freud) who said he treated many patients who were ill because they could not find meaning in life. He also invoked the psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, creator of logotherapy, who from his experience in a Nazi concentration camp realised that those who found meaning in life ended up having a greater capacity to survive the hardships they suffered, especially those who had faith, even stating that "The meaning of life is to give meaning to life" and "A human being is not someone in search of happiness, but in search of a reason to be happy".

In the same vein, the speaker stated that the search for meaning is something permanent, even if it is numbed by suffering. The reference to suffering led him to ask several questions that permeate humanity: "How do I find meaning when I am suffering? If I have incalculable pain, how do I find meaning? In the face of catastrophes, earthquakes, children dying, where is God?" He recalled that in the Bible there is a book written thousands of years ago that directly addresses such questions: the Book of Job. In it stands out the question, "Why do the unjust stay alive and grow richer and richer? It seems that the rod of God does not strike them." Also of note is what Job's supposed friends said to explain his misfortune: "you have not been just, therefore you suffer." Following these statements from the Book of Job, Dr. Guilherme de Abreu stressed that God is not guided by the "dogma of retribution" (you did wrong, you will receive wrong and vice versa), explaining that the Book of Job sets God to answer in a surprising way with some questions, which in a summarised way he expressed thus: "What do you know Job? You are far removed from what I am. You are not trusting Me." Then he again referred to Chesterton indicating that this author clarified that penetrating the mystery of God is done on a path of doubt, until doubting oneself, placing oneself humbly and trustingly in His hands. Quoting again the work of Benedict XVI, he explained that God does not explain anything to Job, he defines his limits, he points them to the mystery. In this regard he also recalled God's answer to Moses: "I am He who is" which is an affirmation that God is mystery and one cannot "judge" God from "material gravity"; the mystery of suffering is answered with the mystery of the resurrection.

The speaker also explained that God does not take us into the mystery to hurt us, but because he wants us to join him, to integrate ourselves into the very dynamic of the mystery, humbly trusting ("happy are those who believe without having seen"). That is, whoever believes without seeing, is already integrating the mystery, is approaching the divine reality.

Then the speaker referred to the characteristics of the mystery of God, stressing that the letters of Saint John reveal the density of this mystery by introducing a new idea of the Divine, a God who is Love and who, being God, is not an invisible abstraction, since to be connected to Him implies at the same time being connected to the other: "If anyone says, 'I love God,' but hates his brother, he is a liar, for he who does not love his brother whom he sees cannot love God whom he does not see" (1 John 4:20). (1 John 4:20). The visible and the invisible interpenetrate one another. A Triune God, that is, three Persons who are consubstantially one God, is a mystery. For Dr Guilherme de Abreu we find some clue to this mystery of the Holy Trinity in Benedict XVI's reflection on the meaning of the word "Person", for it is not a singular absolute, but "a looking towards", a "resonating through". It follows that no one is a person without being in relationship

and the same characterises God, a relationship of three Persons in total trust. But God remains a mystery, more difficult to understand "than to fill a small hole in the sand with the sea", said the speaker, referring to the well-known story of Saint Augustine. He also noted that Christ himself lived in mystery, which is paradigmatic when Jesus told his disciples when they asked him if this was the time to restore Israel (Acts 1:6-11). Jesus explained to them that it was not for them to know what the Father had established by his exclusive authority. Jesus trusts in what is reserved exclusively for the Father. Hence, to approach the mystery of God is to be able to "remove the scales" (as happened to St Paul, being blind after conversion - Acts 9:18), to place oneself in a position of total trust and humility before the mystery.

At this point, the speaker summarised it in five points to indicate the essential challenges of the mystery of love: humility (as in Christ, what most stands out is trust and meekness, rather than power, and thus Jesus reveals the absolute Love of God in a pure way); faith (countering "material gravity", recognising the limits of reason to supernatural things, contemplating and praying); complete love experience (the inseparability of loving God and one's brother); communion with the mystery (life in the Church, frequenting the Eucharist where the fullness of touch happens between the visible and the invisible through the consubstantiation of the bread and wine in the Body and Blood of the Lord); evangelisation (to live the mystery is to be impelled to communicate it, like St Paul - "It is Christ who lives in me"). In this same sense he explained the well-known trilogy "almsgiving, prayer and fasting", that is, concern for others, contemplation of God - mystery, seeking to be better.

The talk ended with a reference to "Adam's mistake", because he wanted to be like God, which in itself is not evil, but he fell into the trap of seeing God as an independent, autonomous, self-sufficient being, not having understood that God is relationship, love, obedience unto death. In this regard, Dr Guilherme de Abreu explained that Adam isolated himself and became alone, and we run the same risk if we seek a God who measures up to our "material gravity" and do not seek Him as a mystery that incorporates us into a relationship.

After the communication, Mariana and Leandro sang a second song, which somehow prolonged Dr. Guilherme de Abreu's lecture: "As you wish, wherever you wish, whenever you wish, without doubting, without fearing anything, to be available, as your son...".

Finally, Father Marçal Pereira made the final farewells, thanking the speaker, the organising team and those present and inviting them to the next conference.

José Manuel Cruz