

NEW WINE INTO NEW WINESKINS

*“Moreover, we are near the renewal of the triennial Vows: and this is a providential circumstance to clarify everything in the light of God”
(St. John Calabria).*

The renewal of the triennial vows is a providential grace and an occasion to bring our consecrated life under the light of the word of God and of the Calabrian Charism. It is also an occasion to let ourselves be enlightened and to praise the Lord for the journey of our consecrated life; to perceive the aspects that still need to be evangelized; and to welcome the call to become prophecy of the kingdom of God in the history. In this meditation/reflection I want to propose some biblical and charismatic ideas that can help us live this event of grace as a new Pentecost, for our personal life and for the Opera. We consider *three fragments of biblical light* that will enlighten us in this journey of prayer and renewal. The verses of the Word that will guide us present three images or metaphors to reread our consecrated life and our mission. These three images are: *heart, wine* and *oil*.

1 – Blessed are those with a pure heart, for they shall see God (Mt 5: 8)

To see God is one of the deep desires that dwell in our interiority. This deep desire continuously makes resound the invitation of the Lord: *«Seek my face!»* (Ps 27: 8). In the beatitudes Jesus makes a marvellous announcement: *“Blessed are those with a pure heart, for they shall see God”* (Mt 5: 8). In order to understand the meaning of this beatitude we need to deepen the biblical meaning of two words: *heart* and *pure*. For the Hebrew culture, the heart is the centre of the person, his/her mentality, sentiments and thoughts; it is the place where the intentions of human person dwell and in which the art of discernment takes place. The biblical tradition teaches us that God does not look at appearances, but sees the heart (cf. 1 Sam 16: 7); that’s why we can say that just starting from our heart we can see God. The image of the heart expresses not only the person in its interiority and unity, but it means and concentrates the ability to love and be loved. Symbolically, we can say that the heart has a certain type and quality of eyes that make us see and contemplate God. Also for Fr. Calabria *“the heart is everything in man; in the heart is the seat of love; and as warmth is natural for fire, so is love for the heart”*.¹ Only a *“pure heart can see and understand all things in their reality and truth”*;² it can *“see God in all people – in the poor you meet on the way, in the person which you deal with, in the children you educate, in the souls that divine Providence makes you meet, in our brothers, in this Father of yours, who holds God’s place... – and see all people in God”*.³

A second important word in this beatitude is *pure*. *Purity* indicates the quality that the heart needs to see God. The one in whom a pure heart dwells, can see God; if one has not a pure

¹ J. CALABRIA, * 5689/A, *Discorso* (small speech) in honour of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

² J. CALABRIA, *Letter to Franchini Don Giovanni* * 3371 23-5-1919.

³ J. CALABRIA, *“My Beloved Brothers...”*, * Let. 59, The Holy Retreat 1948.

heart, he cannot see God. In order to express this quality of the heart, the evangelist Matthew uses the word *katharos* that means transparent, clean, limpid and free from contaminants. At this point we can wonder: *What or who can make our heart impure?* There are many elements and attitudes that can make our heart impure and indifferent towards God and our brothers and sisters: one of these is the attachment to things that pollutes the heart and damages our interiority; another one is the passion for “*things that pass, that make us lose the taste and attraction for the realities that do not pass*”, and have the taste of eternity. Pope Francis often makes use of the expression *spiritual worldliness* to describe a series of disordered passions and attachments, which fragment the heart, making us look for the wrong treasure.

To avoid looking for the wrong treasure, by filling our interiority with any sort of trinkets and idolatries, one of the medicines we have available is the vow of poverty. Walking the way of poverty, through the detachment and sharing our goods and lives, our heart lives processes of purification and recovers the transparency necessary to see God and to see brothers and sisters, especially poor and marginalized. The vow of poverty is a kind of “*wall belt*” that protects and frees the heart from every pollution and impurity. In this perspective Pope Francis urges us: «*In consecrated life, poverty is both a “wall” and a “mother”. It is a “wall” because it protects consecrated life, and it is a “mother” because it helps consecrated life to grow and to walk the right way. The hypocrisy of consecrated men and women, who profess the vow of poverty and yet live as rich people, hurts the souls of the faithful and damages the Church. Think also how dangerous it is the temptation to adopt a purely functional and worldly mentality, which leads some religious to put their hope only in human means, and destroys the testimony of poverty that Our Lord Jesus Christ lived and taught us*» (Pope Francis to the religious of Korea).

When the heart is pure we can “*see God*”, that is, we can understand his loving and provident action in our life and history, we can listen to his voice in our heart, grasp and welcome his presence where it is and where it is manifested: in the poor, in the Eucharist, in his Word, in fraternal communion and in the Church. And all this allows us to experience in advance the presence of God, which already begins in this life, “*living by faith, without seeing*” (2 Cor 5: 7) until we “*will see him face to face*” (1 Cor 13: 12), eternally. The grace of the renewal of the triennial vows is a good occasion to bring back our consecrated life and our vow of poverty under the light of this beatitude. Letting me light up with this Word, I can ask myself: «*Does my “existential electrocardiogram” reveal a pure heart and a process of purification, or, instead, a heart still so attached and full of idolatry? Am I able to see the presence of God in my daily life and mission? Are there any trinkets which occupy part of my life and mission, of which I need to get rid? Does the experience of my vow of poverty make me a free and transparent person?*»

Let us be questioned by the same Fr. Calabria, through these words that do not expire over time: “*Things of the earth are nothing but means given us by the Lord to go up to him, to Heaven. Woe to those who attach themselves to the earth! ... [Let us examine our] detachment from things of the earth: these things are necessary, yes, but only to lift us up to Heaven, to serve God, to sustain us in our ministry. Woe to us if we are slave of habits and small vices that reveal lightness of mind, frenzy to enjoy life, we too, as the world says, even*

in non-bad things! The world will make its renunciations if we have given a generous example of renunciation of things that are not sin, but are too superfluous".⁴

2 – New wine into new wineskins (Mk 2: 22)

A second *fragment of biblical light* that we consider now is the invitation of Jesus to put "*new wine into new wineskins*". In this verse there are again two fundamental words to deepen, which enlighten our journey: *wine* and *wineskins*. In the Bible there is a sort of biblical theology linked to wine. In the first testament the wine says close relationship with the covenant (Dt 7: 11-13), with messianic time, in which wine will spring with abundance, of superior quality, and will be free (Gen 27: 28-29; 49: 10-12; Is 25: 6), with the espousal love of Adonai towards his people (Songs 1: 2.4; 2: 4; 4: 10; 7: 3.10; 8: 2), with the Word and the Wisdom of God (Jer 23: 9; Pr 9: 2.5). The New Testament connects wine with the "*kingdom of God*": «*I will not taste the fruit of the vine again until the day I drink the new wine in the Kingdom of God*» (Mk 14: 25) and the "*New Covenant*": «*This cup is the new covenant, sealed in my blood*» (Lk 22: 20; 1 Cor 11: 25). According to the tradition of the New Testament the wine is the symbol of the gospel of Jesus the Messiah, of his Revelation, which cannot be frustrated by a compromise with the old wine of Judaism (cf. Mt 9: 14-17; Mk 2: 18-22; Lk 5: 33-39). The wine is the symbol of love which is offered and poured out abundantly and completely. When Jesus speaks of wine He describes it using the adjective *new*.⁵ It is not about any wine, but about *new wine*, fresh, original, never tasted before. It is new wine not only because it is more recent than an older one; it is new because it is original and unique and produces newness of life.

To welcome this wine means letting ourselves be transformed by the love of God the Father, revealed by Jesus through the offer of his life. And just because it is a *new wine*, that is "*alive and giving life*" to processes of vivification, we have to welcome it into *new wineskins*.⁶ Clearly the wineskins are a symbol of our life and attitude before the new wine, which Jesus offers and embodies. And our welcome to this new wine must have a new quality which makes us live according to the new wine. To be *new wineskins* means to obey the indications that the new wine arouses in us and in our relationships. To welcome the new wine with new attitudes means to obey the novelty of the Kingdom of God. To be new wineskins means to practice obedience according to the taste of the new wine that is love. "*Our God is a God who always makes the things new, and asks our docility to his novelty. In the Gospel, Jesus is very clear: new wine into new wineskins. God himself brings the wine, but it must be received with openness to novelty. That is what we call docility*" (Pope Francis). The tastiest fruit of docility is obedience to the Word, or to live doing what the

⁴ J. CALABRIA, *Letter to former pupils priests*, * 8591 1-8-1951.

⁵ In biblical Greek two words are used to mean new: *neos*, new, meaning original and fresh, in the case of wine it means freshly-made, in state of ferment; *kainos*, new, with a new quality never seen before. The evangelist uses *kainos* for the wineskins; that is, in front of the new wine that is Jesus, the requested attitude is the welcome, but an original and unprecedented welcome, that requires a change of life and conversion.

⁶ The wineskin the parable refers to is a container of soft leather, which is still able to expand so as to help the breath of the new wine in continuous ferment. Were the wineskin, instead, dry and stiff, due to time wear, it would not have the elasticity necessary to withstand the lively pressure of new wine. And then it cannot but split and make lose the content and the container.

Word of God, that is the new wine, indicates and asks us to live. *“Jesus needs humble instruments, docile, obedient and full of faith: these are the true riches and the secret to accomplish the divine will, and to make sure that the Congregation of the Poor Servants is an ark of peace and health for all souls and for the entire humanity”*.⁷ *“... Everything is great before God, if we do all things with great love for him; if we are glad to change, to enter the shadow as well as to get out of it if that is what obedience wants, always humble, docile, depending entirely on the Superiors, remembering that only what we do with their blessing will also have God’s blessing”*.⁸

To walk the path of obedience means to have the courage to become new wineskins, for the new wine that is continuously offered and poured into us, and through us in the mission. To live obedience means not to resist, not to be rigid wineskins, but let ourselves be moulded by the new wine that dwells in us. The grace of the renewal of the triennial vows is a good occasion to bring again our consecrated life and our vow of obedience under the light of this new wine offered by Jesus, that is the same Jesus. Letting me light up with this Word I can ask myself: *How am I welcoming the new wine into the wineskins of my life and my relationships? Is my way of living the vow of obedience able to express the new wine of love? Does the new wine find in me the docility necessary to live and to do what the Word of God indicates and asks me to live?*

The same Fr. Calabria asks us: *“Am I really convinced that I am nothing but zero and misery, and yet, together with the Lord and breathing his spirit, I will make true miracles? Brothers, the Lord wants and calls for humble instruments, docile and malleable, to accomplish above all, the sanctification of our souls, and then, the great and new designs of the present hour”*.⁹ *“Never forget that you are instruments and ministers of the Lord; who does everything is him, Jesus, as long as he finds docility in you, obedience, humility and burning charity”*.¹⁰

3 – The wise virgins and the oil in small flasks (Mt 25: 4)

The third *fragment of biblical light* that enlightens our reflection and prayer is taken from the parable of the ten virgins waiting for the bridegroom. In this verse, I want to emphasize two words: *lamp* and *oil*. They are two symbols very present in biblical language: the lamp reminds us of Jesus’ invitation to be light of the world; it reminds us of the lamp that cannot be put under a bushel, and then, that we cannot waste our life, we cannot hide under a bucket to avoid living; and it reminds us also of the city built on the hill-top that indicates the destination to the traveller, as well as our Christian and consecrated life should help our neighbours to find the direction and the deep meaning of life.

But the lamp needs oil to keep shining: it is the oil of welcome that is used just to light the torches while awaiting for the coming of the bridegroom; but the oil is also used over the injuries of those who have been beaten by life, as in the parable of the Samaritan; and above all, with oil, the Messiah is consecrated, the One whom our heart is continuously waiting for.

⁷ J. CALABRIA, *Letter to Don Stanislao*, May 15, 1942.

⁸ J. CALABRIA, *“My Beloved Brothers...”*, Letter 30, Pentecoste [May 24] 1942

⁹ J. CALABRIA, *“My Beloved Brothers...”*, Letter 39, September 29, 1944.

¹⁰ J. CALABRIA, *“My Beloved Brothers...”*, Letter * 8661, Verona, 29-6-1952.

The oil therefore is the symbol of very personal and deep gestures, and perhaps this is the reason why the parable excludes the possibility to find it at the market, and maybe at a good price. There are gestures in our life that only we can do, gestures that cannot be delayed. There are situations asking us to be ready, since there will not be another occasion.

Where is then the difference between the wise and the foolish virgins? Certainly not in falling asleep, but in having prepared their lamp. And to prepare one's own lamp means to have oil in small flasks. Sometimes the lamp can go out, but if in our life we have practiced lighting and using the lamp, then in the moments of darkness we will know where to put our hands. The problem of the foolish virgins is not their sleep; their problem is previous: they did not take care of the lamp that was entrusted to them. To be without a small reserve of oil in small flasks, means neglecting the essential relationships, precisely those which produce the oil of inner life. In fact the bridegroom says he does not know them at all. Not to know means lack of personal relationship. In their life they never took the trouble to know the bridegroom, that's why now they find themselves unprepared. It is just in moments like these that we realize if we have or don't have the small flasks of oil.

Lighted lamps need oil, need to be fed otherwise they go out. The vow of chastity, that is a relationship of personal and deep intimacy with the Lord, produces this oil and keeps the small flasks always full of love and affection, passion and offering, desire and charity. The lighted lamp is the symbol of our affectivity consecrated to the Lord and to the service of our brothers and sisters; this lamp to stay lit needs care and nurturing. To live the vow of chastity means to cultivate a personal and intimate relationship with Jesus Christ, to the point of being able to receive in the small flask of our heart the oil that feeds our lamp, and makes our life fruitful and shining. St. John Calabria used many times the expression *lighted lamps* to speak of our relationship with Jesus Christ and our life of prayer: "*Be lit lamps, then keep them supplied with the oil of the inner life; be punctual in the exercises of piety and in the observance of the holy Rules; avoid all luxuries, love study, work and retired life*". In another passage he writes: "*It is up to us to keep this lamp of God alive and lighted; it will keep alive and lighted if we will feed it with the oil of faith, of love of God and charity*". Without prayer there will not be a life of fruitful and shining chastity; without the oil of inner life the lamp of our consecration goes out. An unlit lamp, a consecrated affectivity without life is not prophetic and does not announce the goodness of the consecrated love.

The grace of renewal of the triennial vows is a good occasion to bring again our consecrated life, our life of chastity, under the light of this lit lamp. Letting me light up with this word I can ask myself: *What does the image of the lit lamp and the small flasks of oil tell me? What am I doing to keep my lamp lighted, that is my consecrated life? How my way of living the vow of chastity is becoming a shining prophecy of fruitful and consecrated love?*

For personal prayer

In your moment of personal prayer you are invited to *read within you*, in your heart and gestures, mind and offer to the Lord, starting from the three images we have proposed in this reflection: *pure heart, new wine and new wineskins, and small flasks of oil*. In our personal prayer we can return to the questions proposed in the reflection.

To bring these *fragments of biblical light* closer to our consecrated life, certainly will make us feel the beauty and joy of the choice we have made, perceive the need of a better care and attention, and help us discern what in our life needs conversion, detachment, and inner freedom.

In order to continue living our consecrated life with prophecy and joy, through the vows, fraternal life and mission, it is fundamental to assume more and more the filial abandonment characteristic of Calabrian spirituality. “*While the whole world is upset to go after the things of the earth, we must aspire only to heaven and to holiness: we have the mission to show all men that the spirit of the Lord is kept through humility and poverty, and through unconditioned abandonment to divine Providence*” (St. John Calabria). For the moments of prayer I suggest the three passages where we find the fragments of biblical light that I have proposed:

Mt 5: 1-8 – *The beatitudes: path towards the holiness of life and the vow of poverty.*

Mk 2: 18-22 – *New wine into new wineskins: to be new wineskins through obedience.*

Mt 25: 1-13 – *The wise virgins and the oil in small flasks: to keep lit the lamp through chastity.*