

Patience

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Words of Spirituality

by ENZO BIANCHI, founder of Bose

Patience is respect for the time another person needs and awareness of the fact that we experience time together, 'in the plural,' and that it is our shared experience of time that makes relationships, communication and love possible.

The Bible attests that patience is above all a divine prerogative: according to Exodus 34:6 God is *makrothýmos*, 'forbearing,' 'long-suffering,' 'patient' (the equivalent expression in Hebrew has the literal meaning of 'slow to anger'). The God who entered into a covenant with a 'stiff-necked' people cannot be other than patient! The full extent of God's patience was manifested in his sending his Son Jesus Christ and in Christ's death for sinners, and this patience is still what sustains the present: "The Lord does not delay his promise...but he is patient (*makrothymeî*) with you, not wishing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). God's patience in the Bible is expressed through the fact that he is the God who speaks: by speaking, he gives the listener time to respond, and waits for him or her to make a change of heart. The patience of God should not be confused with impassibility: on the contrary, it is the "endurance of his passion" (E. Jünger) and the far-reaching gaze of his love, a love that "takes no pleasure in the death of the sinner, but rather in the sinner's conversion, that he may live" (cf. Ezekiel 33:11). It is a force that is active even when we have not yet set out on the path of conversion.

The patience of God finds its most eloquent expression in the passion and cross of Christ: here the dissymmetry between God, who waits patiently, and sinful humanity increases beyond measure in the passionate love and suffering of God in his crucified Son Jesus Christ. Since the moment of the death of Christ on the cross, patience as a Christian virtue has been a gift of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22) granted by the crucified and risen Christ, and a participation in the energies that have their origin in the Paschal event. For Christians, patience is inseparable from faith, and it includes both perseverance - faith that endures with the passing of time - and *makrothymía*, the art of 'taking a step back' in order to see the entire picture, and of accepting the incompleteness of the present. This second aspect tells us that patience is necessarily humble. As we discover that we ourselves are incomplete, we learn to be patient with ourselves; as we recognize the incompleteness and fragility of our relationships with others, we learn to be patient with those around us; and as we confess that the divine plan of salvation has not yet been fully accomplished, we express our patience through our hope, our invocation, and our longing for salvation. Patience is the virtue of a church that waits for the Lord, living responsibly within the 'not yet' of salvation without trying to anticipate an end not yet revealed and without proclaiming itself as the fulfillment of God's design.

Patience refuses the impatience of certain mysticisms and ideologies and chooses the 'long route' of listening, obeying, and waiting for others and for God. It seeks to build the communion that can be built within the limits of time and history. Patience is respect for the time another person needs and awareness of the fact that we experience time together, 'in the plural,' and that it is our shared experience of time that makes relationships, communication and love possible. Given the fascination today with the idea of 'time without constraints' - according to which freedom is often imagined as an absence of commitments and restrictions, or as the possibility to go back to an uncontaminated point of departure and begin again from one day to the next, erasing or repressing all of one's past experiences, and especially one's relationships and commitments - it may seem irrelevant or inappropriate to speak about patience, but the subject urgently needs to be addressed. For Christians, patience is as central as agape, as Christ himself. The ability to be patient - that is, to accept the time of the other (God or another person) as something that defines our own existence - is the work of love. "Love is patient" (*makrothymeî*), writes Paul (1 Corinthians 13:4). The Christian's patience is genuine and lasting only to the extent that it is rooted in "the endurance of Christ" (*hypomonè tou Christou*, 2 Thessalonians 3:5). It is not difficult to see why the church fathers often spoke of patience as the summa virtus, the greatest virtue (cf. Tertullian, *De patientia* 1:7): it is an essential element of faith, hope and love.

Ciprian of Carthage writes, "It is faith and hope that make us Christians, but if faith and hope are to produce fruit, they require patience" (Ciprian, *De bono patientiae* 13). Patience, together with faith in Christ, becomes perseverance and "the strength to face ourselves" (Thomas Aquinas). It allows us to resist discouragement and despair in times of trial, to hold out in a given situation over a long period of time without letting the truth of who we are become distorted, and to endure and sustain others and their situations. There is nothing heroic about this spiritual endeavor: all we need is the faith that we in turn are held up by the outstretched arms of Christ on the cross. Christians are sustained in the difficult task of patience by a promise: "Whoever endures to the end will be saved" (Matthew 10:22, 24:13). Enduring means remaining firm in a profession of faith, but it also means expressing our patience actively, supporting others in our ecclesial and community relationships ("bear with one another," Colossians 3:13), as well as in our relationships ad extra, with those outside the Christian community ("be patient with all," 1 Thessalonians 5:14). When we express our patience in this way, it becomes an aspect of our faith that provokes a continual reassessment of the internal structure of the Christian community, the community's understanding of its place in the world, and the way it situates itself among people

of other beliefs. Christian patience challenges the status quo, and as it provokes, it also disquiets.