Opinion

The kingdom of Heaven is at hand. Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, drive out demons. Without cost you have received; without cost you are to give (Mt 10,10).

On his journey, as he was nearing Damascus, a light from the sky suddenly flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” He said, “Who are you, sir?” The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Now get up and go into the city and you will be told what to do” (Acts, 9,3-6).

Roaming across the Balkans

This article has been postponed by almost a decade, for reasons that are beside the point. The time has come to get on with the task at hand and some words definitely need to be said about somebody I met in Bulgaria in the autumn of 2009. I was in the second half of my forties and decided to roam across the Balkans according to no established plan; a chain of events hard to explain led me to Rila, Bulgaria’s most famous monastery, where I stayed a couple of days as a guest. After one of the ceremonies I had the opportunity to attend – during which poetry, music and visual arts praised the Creator in perfect Byzantine unity –, a man in the middle of his thirties visibly wanted to speak to me. And so he did. Olivier was his name and French his nationality, notwithstanding a Bulgarian background. His Bulgarian grandfather was still alive, and that was one of the reasons why he was there, at that time, in that ex-communist country. Devoted both to communism and to atheism (which is its corollary), Olivier’s parents did their best to keep him away from religion. During three decades or so, they were extremely successful in convincing their child that matter was the only thing that really mattered, and that the only immaterial being to be worship was the State – almighty entity revealed by Danton, Marx, Lenin, Stalin, Guevara, Pol Pot and other “prophets” of the Revolution. In their bringing about the “socialist paradise”, what they really did was to establish hell on earth, provoking the death of more than 150 million people; in the eastern side of the Iron Curtain alone, communism claimed the lives of no less than one million people – never forgetting that “Communism is fascism, without fascism’s ability to make the trains run on time”.

Olivier was the one who advised me to go to Albania, arguing that a trip through the Balkans would not be complete without visiting

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Ties with the past were sharply broken; not only did Olivier leave his home in France, but he also decided not to use his family name afterwards, his First Holy Communion.

Olivier said to me, is definitely a place where people “will go out of their way to help you”. 3

Olivier's conversion

Due to the spiritual blockade imposed by Olivier’s parents, the very name God remained unknown to him until he attained maturity and became fully grown. One day, leafing through a dictionary, he came across the word “God”. Astonished by the attributes of “creator” and “ruler” of the world, Olivier “fell of his horse” (Acts 9,4) and, following the example of the Apostle of the Gentiles did two millennia before him, he decided, from that moment on, to live according to the purposes of God. Self-taught, he learnt the Catholic teaching, along with Latin, Greek, English and some other languages. In the middle of this process of changes, he received the Sacrament of Baptism and, afterwards, his First Holy Communion.

Olivier Peregrino at the time we met, at the Monastery of Saint Ivan of Rila (Photo taken by the Author)

3About the importance of medieval peregrinations for the European culture as a whole, see, for instance, Santiago Alcolea. La catedral de Santiago, Madrid, Pius-Ulra, 1958, p. 7 et passim; and Javier Iturbide Díaz et ali. Cuandolas cosas hablan: la historia contada por cincuenta objetos de Navarra, Pamplona, Gobierno de Navarra, 2015, p. 238 et passim.

3She was born in the town of Epivates (close to today’s Istanbul) on the shore of the Sea of Marmara. She was half Serbian and half Greek. (...) Legend says that when she was a child, Paraskeva heard in a church the Lord’s words: “Whoever wants to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me” (Mark 8,34). These words would determine her to give her rich clothes away to the poor and flee to Constantinople. Her parents, who did not support her decision to follow an ascetic, religious life, looked for her in various cities. Paraskeva fled to Chaledon, and afterwards lived at the church of the Most Holy Theotokos in Hecalea Pontica. She lived an austere life, experiencing visions of the Virgin Mary. Her voyages took her to Jerusalem, wishing to spend the rest of her life there. After seeing Jerusalem, she settled in convent in the river Jordanian desert. When she was 25, an angel appeared, telling her to return to homeland. She returned to Constantinople, and then when she was 25, lived in the village of Kallitriathea, in the church of the Holy Apostles. She died at the age of 27” (Nicholas Valentine Riasanovsky et ali. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parascheva_of_the_Balkans).

3The Cappadocians advanced the development of early Christian theology, for example the doctrine of the Trinity and are highly respected as saints in both Western and Eastern churches (...). The fathers set out to demonstrate that Christians could hold their own in conversations with learned Greek-speaking intellectuals and that Christian faith, while it was against many of the ideas of Plato and Aristotle (and other Greek philosophers), was an almost scientific and distinctive movement with the healing of the soul of man and his union with God at its centre (...). They made major contributions to the definition of the Trinity finalized at the First Council of Constantinople in 381 and the final version of the Nicene Creed, finalised there” (Johannes Quasten et ali. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cappadocian_Fathers).


3Referring to the uncountable saint martyrs of Christendom in general, Saint Gregor Nazianzus (329-390) – who, together with Saint Basil of Caesarea (329/330-379) and his brother Saint Gregory of Nyssa (335-395), forms the triad of the Great Cappadocian Fathers –, puts that ”The bodies of such martyrs have the same power as their souls, whether when we touch them, or whether when we revere them”.


A word about somebody I met in Bulgaria (from the primacy of matter over spirituality to the primacy of spirituality over matter)

Like St Francis of Assisi...

Like St Francis of Assisi, the man I met in the Balkans abdicated all the material privileges money could buy; money itself means little or nothing to him. Olivier and I kept in touch until 2016 or so, when he decided to renounce to modern technology, what obviously included internet, telephone and so on. “Man is a social being”, say the philosophers in unison since, at least, the times of Aristotle (384-322 B.C.).<sup>9</sup> Hermit by his own choice, Olivier Peregrino is far from being “lonely”; having decided to store the kind of treasures “that moths and decay cannot destroy, neither thieves steal” (Mt 6,19-21), he is in a better company than most of us.

Acknowledgments

None.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares there is no conflict of interest.

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<sup>9</sup>See, for instance, Aristotle. *Politics*, 1253a; 1278b.

Drawing made by the Author; after Giotto's Saint Francis

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