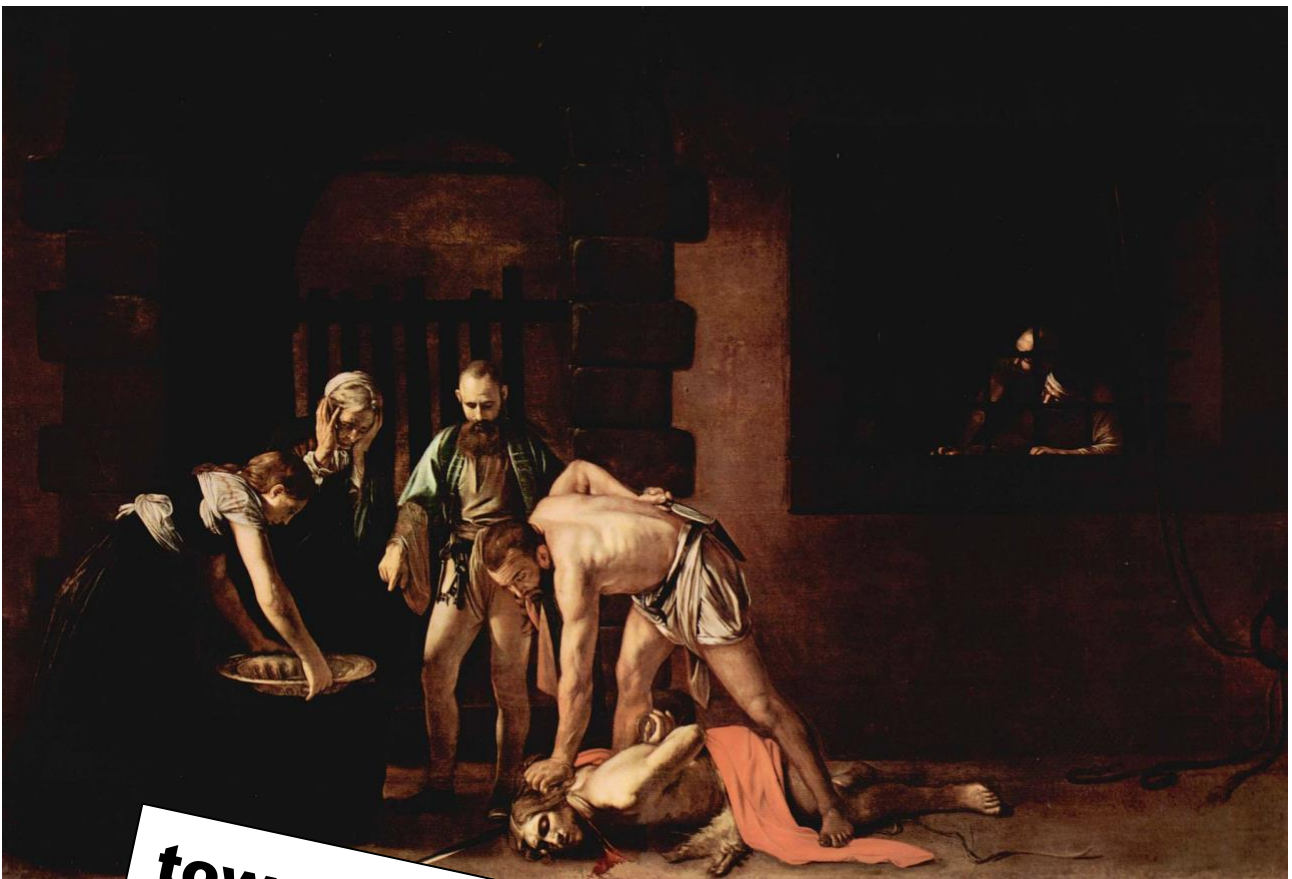


“Art, Violence and Religion”

an aid for a pathway of prayer in “Living Stones”



towards Malta
April 30th -
May 3rd 2020



PIETRE VIVE
LIVING STONES

on the cover

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Beheading of St John the Baptist*, 1608, Oratory of St John's Co-Cathedral, Valletta, Malta.

From the dark, a haunting scene emerges before us: a lifeless body lies on the floor, blood gushing from the neck; the body of a holy man – convicted as a criminal, made a prisoner and stripped from every sign of holiness – glows in the light of an arrested moment of mercy: the blood of John the Baptist is about to wash away the stain of an act of violence.

F. MICHELANG is how Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio enigmatically signs his masterpiece portraying the *Beheading of St John the Baptist*. This is the only known painting signed by the great master. It is a compelling signature, because it is incomplete and because it is written using the “precious blood” oozing from the neck of the martyred Baptist. Why does Caravaggio trace his name, as if using his finger, in the congealing blood of the Baptist? Is this his final *opus* – his final chance for redemption? The signature reveals the dark past of the artist, whose hands, too, were stained with the blood of another man. But it is these same hands of Caravaggio, the murderer and the artist, which are able to create a thing of ugliness but also, paradoxically, of transforming it into beauty. The signature encompasses his entire identity – the sinner, the artist, the saved. And he chooses to place himself right in the centre of the story of salvation, which has as a backdrop a great story of violence. The signature of the artist, thus, becomes a forceful gesture of hope. As the sword – the instrument of violence – is replaced by the brush – the instrument of creation, so too is the crime of the killer by the blood of the victim. Where one stains and destroys, the other cleanses and saves – and it is with this promise in mind, to reconcile and transform the violence of his past, that F(ra). Michelang(o) signs his name.

Living Stones is a pathway of formation in faith. The community meetings alternate between intellectual and spiritual formation.

Intellectual formation consists in moments of common study on art history and theology. In the “seminar method”, each member of the group studies and reports to the other members important basic works for the comprehension of sacred art (like J. Hani, *Symbolism of the Christian Temple*, or G. De Champeaux, *Introduction au monde des symboles*, etc...), but also different studies on the church in which the group offers the guided visits. The experience is that of a “community studying together” so as to be more and more able to “help the souls” (this was the motivation of Saint Ignatius for the long years of study undertaken by the Jesuits).

Spiritual formation consists of a common meditation of the Word of God, using the Ignatian method outlined below. The group gathers in an atmosphere of prayer. One member of the group comments on the biblical text. And then the group disperses in silence for personal meditation for 30 to 60 minutes. Following personal reflection, the group gathers again to share the fruit of the prayer; a time also to share what’s going on in our life and the indications given by the Spirit before, during and after the “Living Stones” service. The intimacy of sharing our personal faith builds up the communion of the group.

The method

These 33 biblical texts form a spiritual dynamic which allows us to pass from a deeper self-awareness to a deeper experience of God and of His salvation. Each text is meant to be meditated according to the method of the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises, which can be summarised in the following steps:

0. Choose a precise time (30? 45? 60 minutes?) and a precise place.
1. **PRESENCE**. Come in the presence of the Lord, thinking about His gaze – with how much love He is looking at you in this very moment, and asking for the gift of concentration. **Then, ask for the grace of this year with your own words (in a short sentence which you can repeat during the meditation), according to each different text (for instance: “Lord, have mercy on my violence”, or “Lord, let me contemplate how you take on yourself the violence of the world”, or “Lord, transform my violence in an experience of your mercy”, or “Lord, transform my violence – my sins and my injuries – in the place of my vocation”).**
2. **MEDITATION**. Read the text several times and stop where some word moves you. Put this “living word” in touch with your memory, your understanding, your desires.
3. **CONVERSATION**. Speak with the Lord “like a friend speaks with his own friend”.

INTRODUCTION

“No one engaged in thought about history and politics can remain unaware of the enormous role violence has always played in human affairs, and it is at first glance rather surprising that violence has been singled out so seldom for special consideration. This shows to what an extent violence and its arbitrariness were taken for granted and therefore neglected”

Hannah Arendt
On violence (New York: Harcourt, 1970), 8.

The biblical tradition and the kerygma of Christian faith, however, seem to focus rather precisely on the human experience of violence.

The Bible is full of violence because life is full of violence. The Bible doesn't describe the world as it should be but rather as it actually is. The Holy Scriptures of Israel and of the Church are the best “mirror” of the human soul one can find, with all its tensions, ambitions, fears and injuries. At the same time, the Bible is not only a “mirror” but also a “window”, which offers a new vision, a perspective of healing and transformation of this deadly energy. This “vision through the window” is like an “enlightenment”, and is actually a personal encounter with the God who saves. Every text of the Bible is a space for this encounter and a step in a long process of “transfiguration of violence”.

The oldest texts of the Bible were composed in a time when war and violence were considered in a lot of civilisations as something divine and, even, as the very origin of the world. Heraclitus (6th cent. BC) writes “War is mother of everything and queen of each reality” (frag. 53). In the oldest “cosmogony” of Babylon, in the poem *Enuma Elish* (around 1250 BC), we can read how the divine warrior, Marduk, created the world, dismembering the mother goddess Tia-mat:

He split her into two like a dried fish:
One half of her he set up and stretched out as the heavens.
He stretched the skin and appointed a watch
With the instruction not to let her waters escape.

[(Thus) the half of her] he stretched out and made it firm as the earth.
[After] he had finished his work inside Tia-mat,
[He spread] his net and let it right out.

Lapis lazuli
seal of the IX
cent. BC, with
the warrior
Marduk



In their remotest experiences of God, the ancient Hebrews probably considered Him just as one of the many “national gods”. He was “their God” among other gods, and they hoped he could be the “most powerful one”. The national gods of their neighbours were often gods of war, whose role was to provide military victory to their own people.

In *L'Illade ou le poème de la force* (1939), Simone Weil writes a deep reflection about violence; a study of our cultural roots: “The true hero, the true subject, the centre of the *Iliad*, is force [in sense of “violence”]. Force employed by man, force that enslaves man, force before which man's flesh shrinks away. In this work at all times, the human spirit is shown as modified by its relation to force, as swept away, blinded, by the very force it imagined it could handle, as deformed by the weight of the force it submits to”.

A lot of biblical texts conserve some traces of this military image of a God who is called “Lord of the hosts” and who is able to “destroy the enemies”. To describe the military force of God was, for the Israelites, a

way to speak about His faithfulness to Israel. But this careful predilection begins to be expressed with other metaphors throughout Bible, step by step, just like human tenderness or the commitment of an artist.

In the description of the origins of the world, Israel chooses to quit the imagery of a “divine violence”, and presents the loving work of an artist, whose words are so faithful that they become concrete reality (Gen 1, 2). Israel will then soon recognise this “loving Creator” as the only “living God”.

To explain the origin of the human being, a lot of Mediterranean and Near-Eastern mythologies provide several narratives about violence and divine jealousies. We read once again in *Enuma Elish*:

Qingu is the one who instigated warfare,
Who made Tia-mat rebel and set battle in motion.
They bound him, holding him before Ea,
They inflicted the penalty on him and severed his blood-vessels.
From his blood he (Ea) created mankind,
On whom he imposed the service of the gods, and set the gods free.

In this poem, the human being was created out of the blood of a crime and came in existence only for the egoistic comfort of the gods. In contrast with this kind of representation, the biblical tradition speaks of the human being as an “image of God” (Gen 1: 27). God himself breathes life into him (Gen 2: 7). That’s why in the Bible life itself belongs to God, and cannot be taken away by anybody but God.

An important step in the development of a deeper idea of God will be, for Israel, to withdraw every violence from human hands and to reserve it only for Himself, as final “avenger” who re-establishes justice. This is why violence is used several times in the Bible as an allegory of God’s fight against our “inner enemies”, such as our idols, our fears. The violence of God means, therefore, the efficacy of salvation. God can truly destroy our sins, our bad addictions, our loneliness. The encounter with God can, therefore, be itself described as a fight: it is the inner struggle against ourselves (like in the wrestling of Jacob). Hence, the entire adventure of the liberation from Egypt and conquest of the Holy Land could be seen as a “parable” of the spiritual path of each and every one of us; going out from slavery and “conquering” a new way of “being on the earth”.

But these violent narratives are not always allegories. Some scholars underlined the importance of the “scapegoat” in Israelite culture, a receptacle which allows violence to be diffused, thus enabling the restoration of pacific common life. A further step will be to discover that, in God, this violence will not be directed against the human kind, nor against animals, but will be completely embraced by mercy. This mercy of God, however, still leaves us with an unanswered mystery: the suffering of the innocent.

If God does not punish violence with violence, then an innocent victim of violence remains unjustly unavenged. In other words, mercy always means “unavenged victim”. This is why an innocent victim, definitively unavenged, will be the definitive Revelation of Mercy.

The first unavenged victim in the Bible is Abel. His name means “what gets lost”. Innocent victims of violence are “what gets lost” in the history of humankind, in the history of every human being. Abel represents each one of us when we feel used, abused, deceived, unjustly humiliated. The Bible narrates how the blood of Abel “cries out from the ground” to obtain vengeance, that is: justice. This cry resonates throughout human history without ever finding an answer. But Abel is not avenged, since we read in the text that God even “protects” Cain with a “sign”. The “vengeance” of God will not be to kill Cain but to turn him into Abel; God will destroy violence by being “destroyed” by violence.

Among the patriarchs, Joseph is another of these “innocent victims”. He was dumped in a cistern and sold to merchants by his brothers. But the end of his story reveals his suffering as a “long road” of reconciliation with their brothers and, even, as a salvation of his brothers. Thus, the victim of violence begins to take the form of a “way of salvation for others”.

In the second book of Chronicles, we read the history of King Josiah, a “righteous king”, a king chosen and “protected” by God; in other words, a “Messiah”. But surprisingly, he was cruelly pierced through and killed by the enemy in a battle. This contradicts the expectation of the “favour of God on the righteous” and on His “Messiah”. Josiah is then a loser “messiah”. With Josiah, Israel learnt that the “Messiah” could mean the “pierced one”.

The Bible gradually understood that the mystery of being a “victim”, “sold”, or “lost”, is the deepest mystery of life, the “last mystery” without an answer. It is somehow, the most intimate secret of the world. That’s why Qoèlet (Ecclesiastes) begins his book by repeating a word which means “what gets lost”: *Evel evelim*. We translate it with the word “vanity” (because of the Latin translation *vanitas*): “Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity” (Ecc 1: 2). But we could translate it as “leak of leaks”, or “waste of wastes”, or “loss of losses”. We could also translate: “Abel of Abels, and all is Abel”. This sentence puts together the highest nihilism and the highest faith because it coincidentally also means that “nothing has sense”, and that “the only sense is to give all” (what we call “love”). The signature of love, the authenticity of love, is the capacity of giving all without waiting for reciprocal gain; to give all as a possible waste or loss. What saves the whole reality is the violently “lost life” of the Saviour.

The prophets specifically underline that the one who speaks the Word of Salvation must be ready to “lose himself”, to pay for it with his own life. At the very end, only a self-given life is a life which saves. In Chapter 53 of Isaiah, we read one of the most violent texts written about the body of a victim:

³ He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

⁴ Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.

⁵ But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed.

It is now clear that God identifies Himself with the mysterious figure of the “suffering servant”. It was easy for the first Christians to see the “Servant of Jahvé” of Isaiah (Chapter 53) as Jesus from Nazareth, the Crucified. Probably, the narrative of the Passion in the Gospels was written while considering texts like Is: 53 or Ps: 22. In this last passage, which begins with “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”, the unrighteous violence suffered by the psalmist is at the end transformed into a “thanksgiving banquet for the poor”.

In the New Testament, violence is again used in an allegorical sense – to describe the radical fighting against those inner enemies. This is the case in the Book of Revelation, in some parables, and in some expressions of St Paul. But sometimes, this “symbolic violence” turns into “real violence” when Jesus Himself performs “prophetic acts”, like the expulsion of the merchants from the temple. In all other cases, the presence of violence in the New Testament is the description of the suffering of the righteous: first, in Jesus and then in His martyrs. This fulfils all the instances of violence described in the Old Testament, since now, the suffered violence becomes forever the “communion with a suffering God”.

To pray with the Bible is, then, to let the sacred text come in touch with our own experiences of, to encounter and channel them to the very end the “passion of God”. The death and Resurrection of Christ allows us to rediscover, with renewed eyes, all the biblical episodes of violence as the “Good Friday” of Salvation. As St Ignatius would say of the crucifixion: the violence is “hiding divinity”; it is precisely in this way that it reveals God’s deepest face. To speak about “violence as a space for the revelation of God”, paradoxically, echoes several of the oldest pagan representations. At the same time, however, it is their precise theological reversal.

Several centuries would pass until suffering and violence is represented in Christian art. The very first steps towards the representation of violence will begin with the violence on the body of Christ, because this violence already means the transfiguration of every violence. In later expressions of art was also find that violence is represented “beyond Christ”. Thus, they somehow represent “Christ beyond Christ”, because from the moment of violence on the Golgotha, violence is inseparable from Christ.



Francisco Goya, *Fight With Cudgels*, 1820

To know more about “violence” in the Bible and theology

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“The fascination of the identity causes the madness of the Self and generates violence, envy and hate. The belief in the Self – the biggest madness of the human being – leads to the destruction of anything which interferes with this belief.”

(M. Recalcati, Jacques Lacan, *Desiderio, godimento e soggettivazione* (Milano: Raffaello Cortina, 2012), 6)

1. Gn 4: Cain and Abel

1The man had intercourse with his wife Eve, and she conceived and gave birth to Cain, saying, "I have produced a male child with the help of the LORD."²Next she gave birth to his brother Abel. Abel became a herder of flocks, and Cain a tiller of the ground.³In the course of time Cain brought an offering to the LORD from the fruit of the ground,⁴while Abel, for his part, brought the fatty portion^{*} of the firstlings of his flock. The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering,⁵but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry and dejected.⁶Then the LORD said to Cain: Why are you angry? Why are you dejected?⁷If you act rightly, you will be accepted;^{*} but if not, sin lies in wait at the door: its urge is for you, yet you can rule over it.

⁸Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let us go out in the field."^{*} When they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.⁹Then the LORD asked Cain, Where is your brother Abel? He answered, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?"¹⁰God then said: What have you done? Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground!¹¹Now you are banned from the ground^{*} that opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand.¹²If you till the ground, it shall no longer give you its produce. You shall become a constant wanderer on the earth.¹³Cain said to the LORD: "My punishment is too great to bear.¹⁴Look, you have now banished me from the ground. I must avoid you and be a constant wanderer on the earth. Anyone may kill me at sight."¹⁵Not so! the LORD said to him. If anyone kills Cain, Cain shall be avenged seven times. So the LORD put a mark^{*} on Cain, so that no one would kill him at sight.¹⁶Cain then left the LORD's presence and settled in the land of Nod,^{*} east of Eden.

Notes:

- There is no "original sin" in the Bible, but rather several narratives that describes "the origin of every sin", that is: a phenomenology of the development in the human mind of a process which results in the destruction of relationships and in violence against others. Chap. 3 of Genesis described the destruction of the man-woman relationship. This chapter describes the destruction of brotherhood.
- Cain is tiller and Abel is a nomad, herder of flocks. It is the oldest economic difference between human beings in the very first steps of every civilisation. The couple of brothers symbolise then the diversity. To encounter another human being is always a difficult questioning on one self. To avoid this crisis of the "alterity", the easiest solution is to eliminate it.
- The text "enters" in the subjective perception of Cain, whose difficult experience of diversity leads him to see the other as the blessed one, or as the preferred one.
- The evil is then described as something that is not part of the human heart, but lays "out of his door" as a "beast", ready to attack him. The human being, even as perpetrator of violence, is then rather "victim" of the "logic" of violence, that makes him "angry".
- Cain means "to acquire" and Abel means "to loose". Both are also symbols of two mentalities or two destinies. The one is the rude "producer" and "obtainer". The other represent all the lost lives of the history, all the victims of violence and injustice.
- Amazing is that God doesn't punish Cain, but rather protects him with a "sign". It's the beginning of a very long history where "God's revenge" will not be "to kill Cain" but "to become Abel".

2. Gn 4: Arts and crafts

17 Cain had intercourse with his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch. Cain also became the founder of a city, which he named after his son Enoch.18To Enoch was born Irad, and Irad became the father of Mehujael; Mehujael became the father of Methusael, and Methusael became the father of Lamech.19Lamech took two wives; the name of the first was Adah, and the name of the second Zillah.20Adah gave birth to Jabal, who became the ancestor of those who dwell in tents and keep livestock.21His brother's name was Jubal, who became the ancestor of all who play the lyre and the reed pipe.22Zillah, on her part, gave birth to Tubalcain, the ancestor of all who forge instruments of bronze and iron. The sister of Tubalcain was Naamah.23* Lamech said to his wives:

“Adah and Zillah, hear my voice;
wives of Lamech, listen to my utterance:
I have killed a man for wounding me,
a young man for bruising me.
24If Cain is avenged seven times,
then Lamech seventy-seven times.”

25* Adam again had intercourse with his wife, and she gave birth to a son whom she called Seth. “God has granted me another offspring in place of Abel,” she said, “because Cain killed him.”26To Seth, in turn, a son was born, and he named him Enosh. At that time people began to invoke the LORD by name.

Notes:

- The town is a product of the first violence. It will be for generations in the biblical literature the symbol of broken relationships, of anonymity, of violent power. This is also the beginning of a very long history that results in the final symbol of the Bible: the heavenly Jerusalem, space of the renewed communion between human beings and between man and God.
- The other arts and crafts are described as the result of the wild energy of Cain that is now “canalised” in something positive for the common life.
- But with the “song of the sword” of Lamech (vv.23-24) it is clear that the justice in human hands tends to the multiplication of violence and to the prevarication of the most powerful.
- In this very hopeless horizon of life going on in a violent context, the “Name” of God is said to be pronounced for the first time. The Name means the presence. It's a “humble marginal presence”, but the reader knows that it is the heart of the whole Scripture

3. Gn 6-9: Noah

6,¹¹But the earth was corrupt in the view of God and full of lawlessness. ¹²When God saw how corrupt the earth had become, since all mortals had corrupted their ways on earth,^f¹³God said to Noah: I see that the end of all mortals has come, for the earth is full of lawlessness because of them. So I am going to destroy them with the earth.

¹⁴Make yourself an ark of gopherwood, (...) ¹⁷I, on my part, am about to bring the flood waters on the earth, to destroy all creatures under the sky in which there is the breath of life; everything on earth shall perish.^h¹⁸I will establish my covenant with you. You shall go into the ark, you and your sons, your wife and your sons' wives with you.(...)

⁷, ¹⁷The flood continued upon the earth for forty days. As the waters increased, they lifted the ark, so that it rose above the earth.¹⁸The waters swelled and increased greatly on the earth, but the ark floated on the surface of the waters.¹⁹Higher and higher on the earth the waters swelled, until all the highest mountains under the heavens were submerged.²⁰The waters swelled fifteen cubits higher than the submerged mountains.²¹All creatures that moved on earth perished: birds, tame animals, wild animals, and all that teemed on the earth, as well as all humankind.^e²²Everything on dry land with the breath of life in its nostrils died. (...)

⁸,³Gradually the waters receded from the earth. At the end of one hundred and fifty days, the waters had so diminished⁴that, in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month, the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat. ⁵The waters continued to diminish until the tenth month, and on the first day of the tenth month the tops of the mountains appeared.

⁶At the end of forty days Noah opened the hatch of the ark that he had made,⁷ and he released a raven. It flew back and forth until the waters dried off from the earth.⁸Then he released a dove, to see if the waters had lessened on the earth.⁹But the dove could find no place to perch, and it returned to him in the ark, for there was water over all the earth. Putting out his hand, he caught the dove and drew it back to him inside the ark.¹⁰He waited yet seven days more and again released the dove from the ark.¹¹In the evening the dove came back to him, and there in its bill was a plucked-off olive leaf! So Noah knew that the waters had diminished on the earth.¹²He waited yet another seven days and then released the dove; but this time it did not come back. (...)

¹⁸So Noah came out, together with his sons and his wife and his sons' wives;¹⁹and all the animals, all the birds, and all the crawling creatures that crawl on the earth went out of the ark by families. ²⁰Then Noah built an altar to the LORD, and choosing from every clean animal and every clean bird, he offered burnt offerings on the altar.²¹When the LORD smelled the sweet odor, the LORD said to himself: Never again will I curse the ground because of human beings, since the desires of the human heart are evil from youth; nor will I ever again strike down every living being, as I have done. (...)

⁹,¹ God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them: Be fertile and multiply and fill the earth.

² Fear and dread of you shall come upon all the animals of the earth and all the birds of the air, upon all the creatures that move about on the ground and all the fishes of the sea; into your power they are delivered.³ Any living creature that moves about shall be yours to eat; I give them all to you as I did the green plants.⁴ Only meat with its lifeblood still in it you shall not eat.

5Indeed for your own lifeblood I will demand an accounting: from every animal I will demand it, and from a human being, each one for the blood of another, I will demand an accounting for human life.

6^z Anyone who sheds the blood of a human being, by a human being shall that one's blood be shed; For in the image of God have human beings been made.

7Be fertile, then, and multiply; abound on earth and subdue it.

8 God said to Noah and to his sons with him:9See, I am now establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you 10and with every living creature that was with you: the birds, the tame animals, and all the wild animals that were with you—all that came out of the ark.11I will establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all creatures be destroyed by the waters of a flood; there shall not be another flood to devastate the earth. 12God said: This is the sign of the covenant that I am making between me and you and every living creature with you for all ages to come:13ⁱ I set my bow in the clouds to serve as a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.14When I bring clouds over the earth, and the bow appears in the clouds,15I will remember my covenant between me and you and every living creature—every mortal being—so that the waters will never again become a flood to destroy every mortal being. 16When the bow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature—every mortal being that is on earth.17God told Noah: This is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and every mortal being that is on earth.

Notes:

- The flood is an old mythological narrative which the authors of the Bible introduce at this point to describe in a “graphic” way the consequences of the human violence. The waters covering all and killing all are symbol of the chaos of a society where the principle of “homo homini lupus” results in the final destruction of humankind and of creation. Cf. Encyclica “Laudato sii”.
- At the same time this symbol taken by the Jews from other religious traditions allows them to enlarge for the whole mankind the experience of the Red Sea. Not only Israel but every human being is “saved from the waters”. The God of Israel is the unique God of the whole humankind.
- But to be saved means to have the responsibility to build a new society. The conflicts and historical breakdowns are the occasion of a new beginning.
- Some scholars observe that animal meat begins to be eaten by humans in this very occasion. Before the flood the first fathers seem to have been “vegetarians”. That allows to interpret the meal nutrition habits as a transformation of the “man – man” violence into a “man – animal” violence. Only the sacrificed flesh is to be eaten. Animal sacrifice is then the transformation of human violence in relationship with God. And to eat meal is a confession of one's own violence.
- The rainbow is the final symbol of the covenant. It's formed by microscopic drops of water, that means it is the “elevation” of what was the sign of chaos and sin. This same instrument of death allows now the refraction of the light, that means, the contemplation of the beauty of the divine light.

4. Gn 11: Babel

1The whole world had the same language and the same words.2When they were migrating from the east, they came to a valley in the land of Shinar* and settled there.3They said to one another, “Come, let us mold bricks and harden them with fire.” They used bricks for stone, and bitumen for mortar.4Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the sky,* and so make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered all over the earth.”5The LORD came down to see the city and the tower that the people had built.6Then the LORD said: If now, while they are one people and all have the same language, they have started to do this, nothing they presume to do will be out of their reach.7Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that no one will understand the speech of another.8So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city.9That is why it was called Babel,* because there the LORD confused the speech of all the world. From there the LORD scattered them over all the earth.

Notes:

- After Gn 3 and Gn 4, this chapter provides a third “fresco” of the phenomenology of sin. This time the violence is social. We have here the photograph of a totalitarian system, as it could be found in ancient Empires, like Egypt or Babylon, and with whom the small people of Israel had to come in touch. “Babel” is probably an allusion to “Babylon” and at the same time an onomatopoeic word for the linguistic chaos. The “town” is a symbol of violent power and prevarication, and the tower in the town reinforces this aspect of arrogance.
- Specific of every violent totalitarianism is the imposition of a “uniformity” which is here symbolised by having the same language. The negation of every diversity is the violence of every social totalitarianism. The social violence takes the place of God (climbs to the heaven), destroying the creation (the diversity of beings and cultures), in the illusion of a self-creation (“make a name for ourselves”).



Bruegel the Elder, *The Tower of Babel*, 1563
(Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum)

- But God (here through an anthropomorphic reaction of fear) destroys the power of every absolute system and through the failure of every self-creation, opens again a long way to rediscover the relationship in the beauty of the diversity.

5. Gn 15: the Covenant

7He then said to him [Abraham]: I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land as a possession. 8“Lord GOD,” he asked, “how will I know that I will possess it?”9* He answered him: Bring me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.10He brought him all these, split them in two, and placed each half opposite the other; but the birds he did not cut up.11Birds of prey swooped down on the carcasses, but Abram scared them away.12As the sun was about to set, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a great, dark dread descended upon him.

13* Then the LORD said to Abram: Know for certain that your descendants will reside as aliens in a land not their own, where they shall be enslaved and oppressed for four hundred years.14But I will bring judgment on the nation they must serve, and after this they will go out with great wealth.15You, however, will go to your ancestors in peace; you will be buried at a ripe old age.16In the fourth generation* your descendants will return here, for the wickedness of the Amorites is not yet complete.

17When the sun had set and it was dark, there appeared a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch, which passed between those pieces.18* On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying: To your descendants I give this land, from the Wadi of Egypt to the Great River, the Euphrates,

Notes:

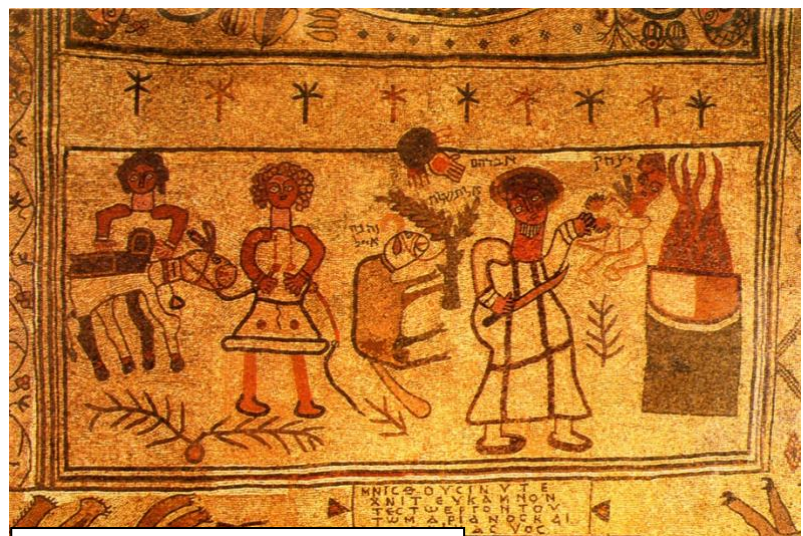
- The covenant between God and Abraham takes the form of the political and military treaties between the peoples of the old Near-East. The ritual was the “cutting” in two halves of several animals to form a corridor where the leaders of the both armies had to pass through. In their ritual walk they had to swear that if something goes wrong in that pact, their body had to finish violently dismembered like the body of these just slaughtered animals. The animals should be possibly still warm, to provide a terrifying impression that remains in the memories. A show of violence seems then to be necessary for a covenant.
- According to this logic, the physical violence in case of disattending the covenant is only the normal result and the necessary “physical translation” of the relational violence of betrayal.
- God asks Abraham to prepare (the Jews say “to cut”) the covenant. But at the very end Abraham doesn’t walk through this corridor of horror, but only God, under the form of a “flaming torch”. The covenant isn’t then a bilateral covenant, but a “unilateral” one. If something goes wrong, only God will become like these slaughtered beasts. With the eyes of the New Testament, this passage announces the cross of Christ as the assumption of every violence in God himself.

6. Gn 22: The Sacrifice of Abraham

1Some time afterward, God put Abraham to the test and said to him: Abraham! “Here I am!” he replied.^a2Then God said: Take your son Isaac, your only one, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah. There offer him up as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you.^b3Early the next morning Abraham saddled his donkey, took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac, and after cutting the wood for the burnt offering, set out for the place of which God had told him. 4On the third day Abraham caught sight of the place from a distance.5Abraham said to his servants: “Stay here with the donkey, while the boy and I go on over there. We will worship and then come back to you.”6So Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, while he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two walked on together,7Isaac spoke to his father Abraham. “Father!” he said. “Here I am,” he replied. Isaac continued, “Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?”8“My son,” Abraham answered, “God will provide the sheep for the burnt offering.” Then the two walked on together. 9When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. Next he bound* his son Isaac, and put him on top of the wood on the altar.^c10Then Abraham reached out and took the knife to slaughter his son.^d11But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, “Abraham, Abraham!” “Here I am,” he answered.12“Do not lay your hand on the boy,” said the angel. “Do not do the least thing to him. For now I know that you fear God, since you did not withhold from me your son, your only one.”^e13Abraham looked up and saw a single ram caught by its horns in the thicket. So Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering in place of his son.^f14Abraham named that place Yahweh-yireh;* hence people today say, “On the mountain the LORD will provide.”

Notes:

- This is a typical text of distinction between the Hebrew tradition and the neighbour pagan cultures. The narrative marks a radical renouncement to the human sacrifices. They will actually often remain a temptation for the Israelites, since Moloch and other Baals were still adored around Jerusalem in historical times.
- At the same time this episode transforms a prohibition of ritual violence against human beings in an occasion of defining better the relationship with the God of Israel as a radical self-giving to Him. The logic of “sacrifice” is now interiorised and absolutized as definition of faith.



Synagogue of Beit Alfa (Israel):
mosaic with the sacrifice of Isaac

7. Gn 25: The birth of Esau and Jacob

21 Isaac entreated the LORD on behalf of his wife, since she was sterile. The LORD heard his entreaty, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant. 22 But the children jostled each other in the womb so much that she exclaimed, "If it is like this, why go on living!" She went to consult the LORD, 23 and the LORD answered her:

Two nations are in your womb,

two peoples are separating while still within you;

But one will be stronger than the other,
and the older will serve the younger. ⁱ

24 When the time of her delivery came, there were twins in her womb. ⁱ 25 The first to emerge was reddish, and his whole body was like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau. 26 Next his brother came out, gripping Esau's heel; ^{*} so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when they were born.

Notes:

- This text shows the raw law of nature: plain equality doesn't exist in life, but even among two twins, one is always the first and the other is the second. The womb of the mother allows actually only one outgoing after the other.
- Jacob means "the deceiver". His life will be a constant attempt to take the first place through every possible strategy. The "need to be the first" is leading all his actions. The Lord will not despise this searching and will choose him beyond every moral evaluation of his comportment.

French Manuscript (14th cent.), with birth of Esau and Jacob



8. Gn 32: Jacob's fighting

23That night, however, Jacob arose, took his two wives, with the two maidservants and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok.24After he got them and brought them across the wadi and brought over what belonged to him,25Jacob was left there alone. Then a man* wrestled with him until the break of dawn.26When the man saw that he could not prevail over him, he struck Jacob's hip at its socket, so that Jacob's socket was dislocated as he wrestled with him.^d27The man then said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go until you bless me."28"What is your name?" the man asked. He answered, "Jacob."^e29Then the man said, "You shall no longer be named Jacob, but Israel,* because you have contended with divine and human beings and have prevailed."30Jacob then asked him, "Please tell me your name." He answered, "Why do you ask for my name?" With that, he blessed him.31Jacob named the place Peniel,* "because I have seen God face to face," he said, "yet my life has been spared."^f

32At sunrise, as he left Penuel, Jacob limped along because of his hip.33That is why, to this day, the Israelites do not eat the sciatic muscle that is on the hip socket, because he had struck Jacob's hip socket at the sciatic muscle.

Notes:

- The conflict of Jacob with his brother fills his whole life. In this episode Jacob is preparing to encounter again his brother after years of separation and after words of condemn that he received from Esau. This step is first of all symbolized by jumping over a torrent. Beyond the Jabbok, Jacob enters in "another land", the territory of "his brother". Its also his entering in a new step of his life.
- Who is the man (or the angel?) who is fighting against him? The scholars of anthropology speak about an old "genie" of the torrent, who defends its area. But in the structure of the narrative this presence is first of all the fear of Jacob himself before meeting his brother. It's like the "spectrum" of Esau, or of his whole broken relationship with him. Further in the text, the reader understands that this presence has something of divine. Jacob is asking Him what he is searching his whole life long: to be blessed.
- With the blessing, this divine presence changes also the name of Jacob, that means his identity. He is no more the "deceiver", but "the one who won against God". In this violent conflict (with himself and with God) Jacob is deeply transformed and encounters a God who accepts to "loose the battle". His creative power appears in His capacity to be defeated.
- The injury Jacob receives makes Him a man marked by the "Passover" ("psh" = to limp).

9. Gn 37: Joseph sold into Egypt

1Jacob settled in the land where his father had sojourned, the land of Canaan.*2This is the story of the family of Jacob.* When Joseph was seventeen years old, he was tending the flocks with his brothers; he was an assistant to the sons of his father's wives Bilhah and Zilpah, and Joseph brought their father bad reports about them.3Israel loved Joseph best of all his sons, for he was the child of his old age; and he had made him a long ornamented tunic.*4When his brothers saw that their father loved him best of all his brothers, they hated him so much that they could not say a kind word to him.

5* Once Joseph had a dream, and when he told his brothers, they hated him even more.6He said to them, "Listen to this dream I had.7There we were, binding sheaves in the field, when suddenly my sheaf rose to an upright position, and your sheaves formed a ring around my sheaf and bowed down to it."8His brothers said to him, "Are you really going to make yourself king over us? Will you rule over us?" So they hated him all the more because of his dreams and his reports.9

9Then he had another dream, and told it to his brothers. "Look, I had another dream," he said; "this time, the sun and the moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me."10When he told it to his father and his brothers, his father reproved him and asked, "What is the meaning of this dream of yours? Can it be that I and your mother and your brothers are to come and bow to the ground before you?"11So his brothers were furious at him but his father kept the matter in mind.

12One day, when his brothers had gone to pasture their father's flocks at Shechem,13Israel said to Joseph, "Are your brothers not tending our flocks at Shechem? Come and I will send you to them." "I am ready," Joseph answered.14"Go then," he replied; "see if all is well with your brothers and the flocks, and bring back word." So he sent him off from the valley of Hebron. When Joseph reached Shechem,15a man came upon him as he was wandering about in the fields. "What are you looking for?" the man asked him.16"I am looking for my brothers," he answered. "Please tell me where they are tending the flocks."17The man told him, "They have moved on from here; in fact, I heard them say, 'Let us go on to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers and found them in Dothan.18They saw him from a distance, and before he reached them, they plotted to kill him.19They said to one another: "Here comes that dreamer!20Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the cisterns here; we could say that a wild beast devoured him. We will see then what comes of his dreams."21

21* But when Reuben heard this, he tried to save him from their hands, saying: "We must not take his life."22Then Reuben said, "Do not shed blood! Throw him into this cistern in the wilderness; but do not lay a hand on him." His purpose was to save him from their hands and restore him to his father.23

23So when Joseph came up to his brothers, they stripped him of his tunic, the long ornamented tunic he had on;24then they took him and threw him into the cistern. The cistern was empty; there was no water in it.

25Then they sat down to eat. Looking up, they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, their camels laden with gum, balm, and resin to be taken down to Egypt.26Judah said to his brothers: "What is to be gained by killing our brother and concealing his blood?27Come, let us sell him to these Ishmaelites, instead of doing away with him ourselves. After all, he is our brother, our own flesh." His brothers agreed.

28Midianite traders passed by, and they pulled Joseph up out of the cistern. They sold Joseph for twenty pieces of silver* to the Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt.*

Notes:

- The text seems to “excuse” the hating feelings of the brothers of Joseph, since his superiority caused by the predilection of the father, is actually something that sounds unjust. The feelings of hate seem here to have their citizenship in the every day life of our families.
- Joseph himself is described as the one who is “searching his brothers”. That means: he is lonely and suffers under this lack of relationship.
- But the violence emerges suddenly over the field of these feelings. It’s the beginning of a long history of sufferings. But precisely in this suffering, the Lord doesn’t abandon Joseph and creates with him an amazing destiny.



Monreale (Sicily), byzantine mosaic of the 12th cent. with Joseph in the cistern

10. Gn 44-45: Joseph revealed

44,27 [Judah speaking to Joseph his brother] Then your servant my father said to us, 'As you know, my wife bore me two sons.28One of them, however, has gone away from me, and I said, "He must have been torn to pieces by wild beasts!" I have not seen him since.29If you take this one away from me too, and a disaster befalls him, you will send my white head down to Sheol in grief.'30"So now, if the boy is not with us when I go back to your servant my father, whose very life is bound up with his, he will die as soon as he sees that the boy is missing;31and your servants will thus send the white head of your servant our father down to Sheol in grief.32Besides, I, your servant, have guaranteed the boy's safety for my father by saying, 'If I fail to bring him back to you, father, I will bear the blame before you forever.'33So now let me, your servant, remain in place of the boy as the slave of my lord, and let the boy go back with his brothers.34How could I go back to my father if the boy were not with me? I could not bear to see the anguish that would overcome my father."

45,1Joseph could no longer restrain himself in the presence of all his attendants, so he cried out, "Have everyone withdraw from me!" So no one attended him when he made himself known to his brothers.2But his sobs were so loud that the Egyptians heard him, and so the news reached Pharaoh's house.3a "I am Joseph," he said to his brothers. "Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could give him no answer, so dumbfounded were they at him.

4"Come closer to me," Joseph told his brothers. When they had done so, he said: "I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt.5But now do not be distressed, and do not be angry with yourselves for having sold me here. It was really for the sake of saving lives that God sent me here ahead of you.6The famine has been in the land for two years now, and for five more years cultivation will yield no harvest.7God, therefore, sent me on ahead of you to ensure for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives in an extraordinary deliverance.8So it was not really you but God who had me come here; and he has made me a father to Pharaoh,* lord of all his household, and ruler over the whole land of Egypt.

Notes:

- When the brothers arrive in Egypt and meet Joseph without to recognise him, he is not immediately able to forget all the sufferings he endured. He begins a long "play" to put his brothers to the test, and explore the feelings he never could perceive in the past.
- The capacity of forgiveness arrives slowly. But in Joseph, in the last conversation it is enriched by a theological new comprehension of his whole history. He reaches the capacity to say that God Himself sent him into Egypt to prepare the way for his brothers. The violence is here completely assumed in a new loving comprehension.

11. Ex 1: Forgetting as origin of violence

8 Then a new king, who knew nothing of Joseph, rose to power in Egypt.⁹He said to his people, “See! The Israelite people have multiplied and become more numerous than we are!¹⁰Come, let us deal shrewdly with them to stop their increase; otherwise, in time of war they too may join our enemies to fight against us, and so leave the land.”

¹¹Accordingly, they set supervisors over the Israelites to oppress them with forced labor. Thus they had to build for Pharaoh^{*} the garrison cities of Pithom and Raamses.¹²Yet the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians began to loathe the Israelites.¹³So the Egyptians reduced the Israelites to cruel slavery,¹⁴making life bitter for them with hard labor, at mortar and brick and all kinds of field work—cruelly oppressed in all their labor. *Command to the Midwives.*¹⁵The king of Egypt told the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was called Shiphrah and the other Puah,¹⁶“When you act as midwives for the Hebrew women, look on the birthstool:^{*} if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she may live.”¹⁷The midwives, however, feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt had ordered them, but let the boys live.¹⁸So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and asked them, “Why have you done this, allowing the boys to live?”¹⁹The midwives answered Pharaoh, “The Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women. They are robust and give birth before the midwife arrives.”²⁰Therefore God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and grew very numerous.²¹And because the midwives feared God, God built up families for them.²²Pharaoh then commanded all his people, “Throw into the Nile every boy that is born, but you may let all the girls live.”

Notes:

- The origin of the violence against the Jews is here very delicately described as the lack of memory about the benefits that Egypt received from the presence of Joseph and the Jews. The new pharaoh had no more historical memory of the gifts of God through Joseph. The spiral of violence begins by forgetting the gifts.
- The following step in this escalation is the comparison with others in the fear of their superiority. Superiority becomes soon “danger”. And danger has to be eliminated.
- It is interesting that the text shows how the efforts of the pharaoh to reduce the power of the Jews are ironically a failure. This very failure reinforces the aggressivity of the one who feels threatened. The violence is here completely under the almost “playing care” of God who prepares a history of liberation.

12. Ex 17:8-16: The battle against the Amalekites

8 Then Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim.

9 So Moses said to Joshua, "Choose for us men, and go out and fight with Amalek. Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand."

10 So Joshua did as Moses told him, and fought with Amalek, while Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill.

11 Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed, and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed.

12 But Moses' hands grew weary, so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it, while Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side. So his hands were steady until the going down of the sun.

13 And Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the sword.

14 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Write this as a memorial in a book and recite it in the ears of Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven."

15 And Moses built an altar and called the name of it, The LORD Is My Banner,

16 saying, "A hand upon the throne of the LORD! The LORD will have war with Amalek from generation to generation."

Notes:

- In all biblical tradition, Israel's journey through the desert is an image of the history of the People and of each person's personal history. Just before reaching Mount Sinai and sealing the Covenant, Israel must face Amalek. Amalek is the image of the stranger who prevents me from moving forward and wants to take my life. In some rabbinical traditions, Amalek literally means "those who lick blood," that is, those who "suck life. It is the great enemy that hides in the wilderness (the desert) or, in other words, the wilderness of life itself.
- This is the first appearance of Joshua, who will finally lead Israel to Earth. Joshua, whose name is the same as Jesus in Aramaic, means "YHWH saves", which is precisely what happens here: it is not weapons but prayer, i.e. the re-establishment of the relationship, which leads to victory.
- Two important gestures
 - a. Moses prays with his arms held high, a gesture proper to the prayer in all the biblical and iconographic tradition. It is also the gesture of Christ on the Cross.
 - b. He sits on a stone to rest. In Hebrew sitting (yšb) also means to inhabit and stone ('bn) sounds very similar to son (bn). The confrontation with the different, the foreigner, is what helps to define one's own identity.

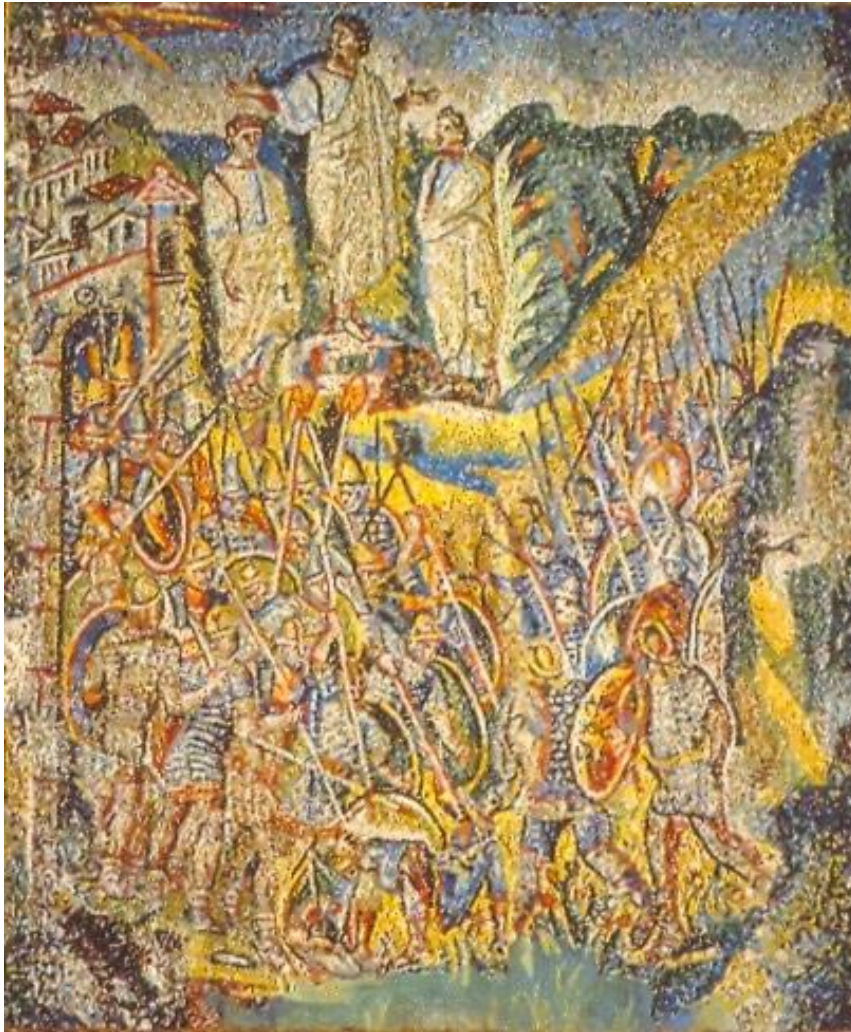
13. 1Sm 15: The anathema... God-wanted violence?

1 And Samuel said to Saul, "The LORD sent me to anoint you king over his people Israel; now therefore listen to the words of the LORD. 2 Thus says the LORD of hosts, 'I have noted what Amalek did to Israel in opposing them on the way when they came up out of Egypt. 3 Now go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have. Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.'" 4 So Saul summoned the people and numbered them in Telaim, two hundred thousand men on foot, and ten thousand men of Judah. 5 And Saul came to the city of Amalek and lay in wait in the valley. 6 Then Saul said to the Kenites, "Go, depart; go down from among the Amalekites, lest I destroy you with them. For you showed kindness to all the people of Israel when they came up out of Egypt." So the Kenites departed from among the Amalekites. 7 And Saul defeated the Amalekites from Havilah as far as Shur, which is east of Egypt. 8 And he took Agag the king of the Amalekites alive and devoted to destruction all the people with the edge of the sword. 9 But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep and of the oxen and of the fattened calves and the lambs, and all that was good, and would not utterly destroy them. All that was despised and worthless they devoted to destruction. 10 The word of the LORD came to Samuel: 11 "I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me and has not performed my commandments." And Samuel was angry, and he cried to the LORD all night. 12 And Samuel rose early to meet Saul in the morning. And it was told Samuel, "Saul came to Carmel, and behold, he set up a monument for himself and turned and passed on and went down to Gilgal." 13 And Samuel came to Saul, and Saul said to him, "Blessed be you to the LORD. I have performed the commandment of the LORD." 14 And Samuel said, "What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears and the lowing of the oxen that I hear?" 15 Saul said, "They have brought them from the Amalekites, for the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen to sacrifice to the LORD your God, and the rest we have devoted to destruction." 16 Then Samuel said to Saul, "Stop! I will tell you what the LORD said to me this night." And he said to him, "Speak." 17 And Samuel said, "Though you are little in your own eyes, are you not the head of the tribes of Israel? The LORD anointed you king over Israel. 18 And the LORD sent you on a mission and said, 'Go, devote to destruction the sinners, the Amalekites, and fight against them until they are consumed.' 19 Why then did you not obey the voice of the LORD? Why did you pounce on the spoil and do what was evil in the sight of the LORD?" 20 And Saul said to Samuel, "I have obeyed the voice of the LORD. I have gone on the mission on which the LORD sent me. I have brought Agag the king of Amalek, and I have devoted the Amalekites to destruction. 21 But the people took of the spoil, sheep and oxen, the best of the things devoted to destruction, to sacrifice to the LORD your God in Gilgal." 22 And Samuel said, "Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams. 23 For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has also rejected you from being king." 24 Saul said to Samuel, "I have sinned, for I have transgressed the commandment of the LORD and your words, because I feared the people and obeyed their voice.

Notes:

- Amalek again (see notes to Ex 17:8-16). The annihilation of that which is opposed to life becomes a *conditio sine qua non* in order to inhabit the earth. It is the paradox of tolerance (Karl Popper): "We must therefore claim, in the name of tolerance, the right not to tolerate intolerance."
- The destruction demanded by YHWH is total, without half measures. There is not the slightest possibility of coexistence with that which has its origin in evil. God asks Saul to deliver Amalek to the anathema (in Hebrew herem). It is the consecration to God, through its destruction, of that which has been conquered. Not surrendering King Agag and the cattle (what is devoured) to the anathema means pretending to appropriate the most precious things of the enemy for one's own benefit. Or in other words, to "make peace" with the wildest part of oneself instead of purifying it.

- Samuel's response and Saul's condemnation reveal that, beyond values such as productivity and efficiency, it is relationship, listening (that is what obedience consists of) that leads to the fullness of one's existence.
- It is interesting to note that a literalist interpretation of this passage has historically led to the justification of genocide, identifying the enemy (e.g., Native Americans) as "Amalek".



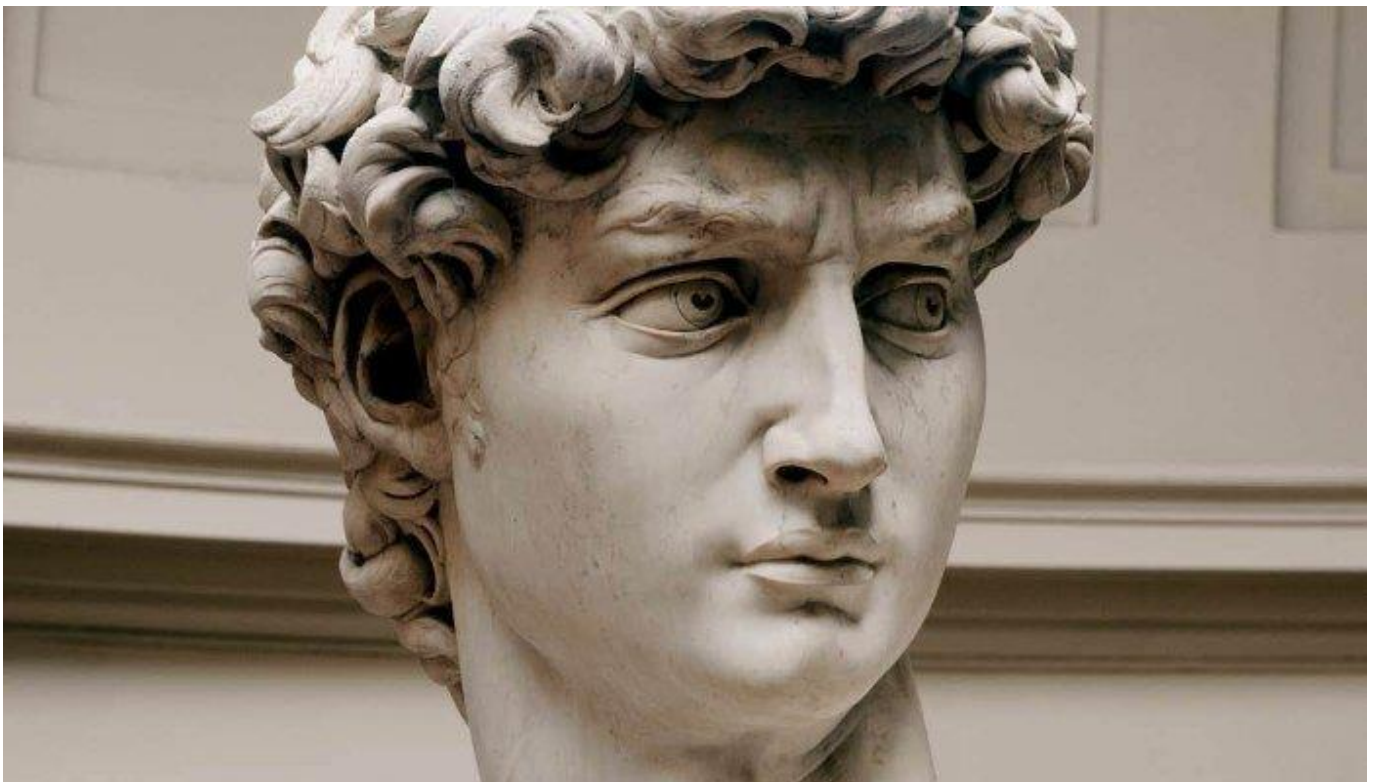
Santa Maria Maggiore (Rome), mosaic (5th cent.) with the victory of Israel on Amalek

14. 2Sm 11: David, Uriah and institutional/state-sanctioned violence

1 In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab, and his servants with him, and all Israel. And they ravaged the Ammonites and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem. **2** It happened, late one afternoon, when David arose from his couch and was walking on the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; and the woman was very beautiful. **3** And David sent and inquired about the woman. And one said, "Is not this Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?" **4** So David sent messengers and took her, and she came to him, and he lay with her. (Now she had been purifying herself from her uncleanness.) Then she returned to her house. **5** And the woman conceived, and she sent and told David, "I am pregnant." **6** So David sent word to Joab, "Send me Uriah the Hittite." And Joab sent Uriah to David. **7** When Uriah came to him, David asked how Joab was doing and how the people were doing and how the war was going. **8** Then David said to Uriah, "Go down to your house and wash your feet." And Uriah went out of the king's house, and there followed him a present from the king. **9** But Uriah slept at the door of the king's house with all the servants of his lord, and did not go down to his house. **10** When they told David, "Uriah did not go down to his house," David said to Uriah, "Have you not come from a journey? Why did you not go down to your house?" **11** Uriah said to David, "The ark and Israel and Judah dwell in booths, and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field. Shall I then go to my house, to eat and to drink and to lie with my wife? As you live, and as your soul lives, I will not do this thing." **12** Then David said to Uriah, "Remain here today also, and tomorrow I will send you back." So Uriah remained in Jerusalem that day and the next. **13** And David invited him, and he ate in his presence and drank, so that he made him drunk. And in the evening he went out to lie on his couch with the servants of his lord, but he did not go down to his house. **14** In the morning David wrote a letter to Joab and sent it by the hand of Uriah. **15** In the letter he wrote, "Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, that he may be struck down, and die." **16** And as Joab was besieging the city, he assigned Uriah to the place where he knew there were valiant men. **17** And the men of the city came out and fought with Joab, and some of the servants of David among the people fell. Uriah the Hittite also died. **18** Then Joab sent and told David all the news about the fighting. **19** And he instructed the messenger, "When you have finished telling all the news about the fighting to the king, **20** then, if the king's anger rises, and if he says to you, 'Why did you go so near the city to fight? Did you not know that they would shoot from the wall? **21** Who killed Abimelech the son of Jerubbesheth? Did not a woman cast an upper millstone on him from the wall, so that he died at Thebez? Why did you go so near the wall?' then you shall say, 'Your servant Uriah the Hittite is dead also.'" **22** So the messenger went and came and told David all that Joab had sent him to tell. **23** The messenger said to David, "The men gained an advantage over us and came out against us in the field, but we drove them back to the entrance of the gate. **24** Then the archers shot at your servants from the wall. Some of the king's servants are dead, and your servant Uriah the Hittite is dead also." **25** David said to the messenger, "Thus shall you say to Joab, 'Do not let this matter trouble you, for the sword devours now one and now another. Strengthen your attack against the city and overthrow it.' And encourage him." **26** When the wife of Uriah heard that Uriah her husband was dead, she lamented over her husband. **27** And when the mourning was over, David sent and brought her to his house, and she became his wife and bore him a son. But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD.

Notes:

- David does not appear in this account as king. In fact, he appears "reneging" on his actual functions. Throughout the story he is not mentioned as "King David. He is simply David, the person behind the royal diadem. Still, it is clear who he is. He is always in an elevated position: on the roof, in the palace. Real power, which must be a reflection of divine power, faces human limits.
- Although not stated in the text, numerous scholars have suggested seeing here an allusion to violence in the relationship between man and woman presenting the relationship between David and Bathsheba almost as a rapture or rape. The story is not clear on this point, it seems to imply mutual consent, the asymmetry between the position of one and the other is clear. David uses his power to satisfy his own desires, not for the benefit of the people. He doesn't go to war, he doesn't run affairs of state, but he walks around, he gets distracted and infatuated with someone else's wife and does his best to sleep with her. This caprice and abuse of power is what sets the cycle of violence in motion once and for all, which takes the form of a continuous "flight forward.
- Over and over again throughout the story, David uses anonymous agents who carry out his orders (they find out about the woman, take her to the palace, call Uriah, send messages and gifts...). The ease of means at the king's disposal is masked by the minimalist form in which they are represented: informants, spies and gossips are ubiquitous in the palace, but their faces and names are concealed in the darkness of their trade. His discourse is an omnipresent murmur that sustains the action of the figures that do have that face and that name. At the same time that they violate his privacy, they resonate in his works and become the very medium on which the political and military success of the ruler is based.
- In the encounter between David and Uriah, the separation between the king and the person behind the title is evident. David behaves and presents himself as the magnanimous king who seeks to provide rest for his faithful soldier, but in reality he is trying to safeguard his own reputation and advance a hidden agenda.



Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Davide*,
Florence 1501-1504.

15. Is 53: the violence that saves

1Who would believe what we have heard?

To whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?

2He grew up like a sapling before him, like a shoot from the parched earth; He had no majestic bearing to catch our eye, no beauty to draw us to him.

3He was spurned and avoided by men, a man of suffering, knowing pain, Like one from whom you turn your face, spurned, and we held him in no esteem.

4Yet it was our pain that he bore, our sufferings he endured. We thought of him as stricken, struck down by God and afflicted,

5But he was pierced for our sins, crushed for our iniquity. He bore the punishment that makes us whole, by his wounds we were healed.

6We had all gone astray like sheep, all following our own way; But the LORD laid upon him* the guilt of us all.

7Though harshly treated, he submitted and did not open his mouth; Like a lamb led to slaughter or a sheep silent before shearers, he did not open his mouth.

8Seized and condemned, he was taken away. Who would have thought any more of his destiny? For he was cut off from the land of the living, struck for the sins of his people.

9He was given a grave among the wicked, a burial place with evildoers, Though he had done no wrong, nor was deceit found in his mouth.

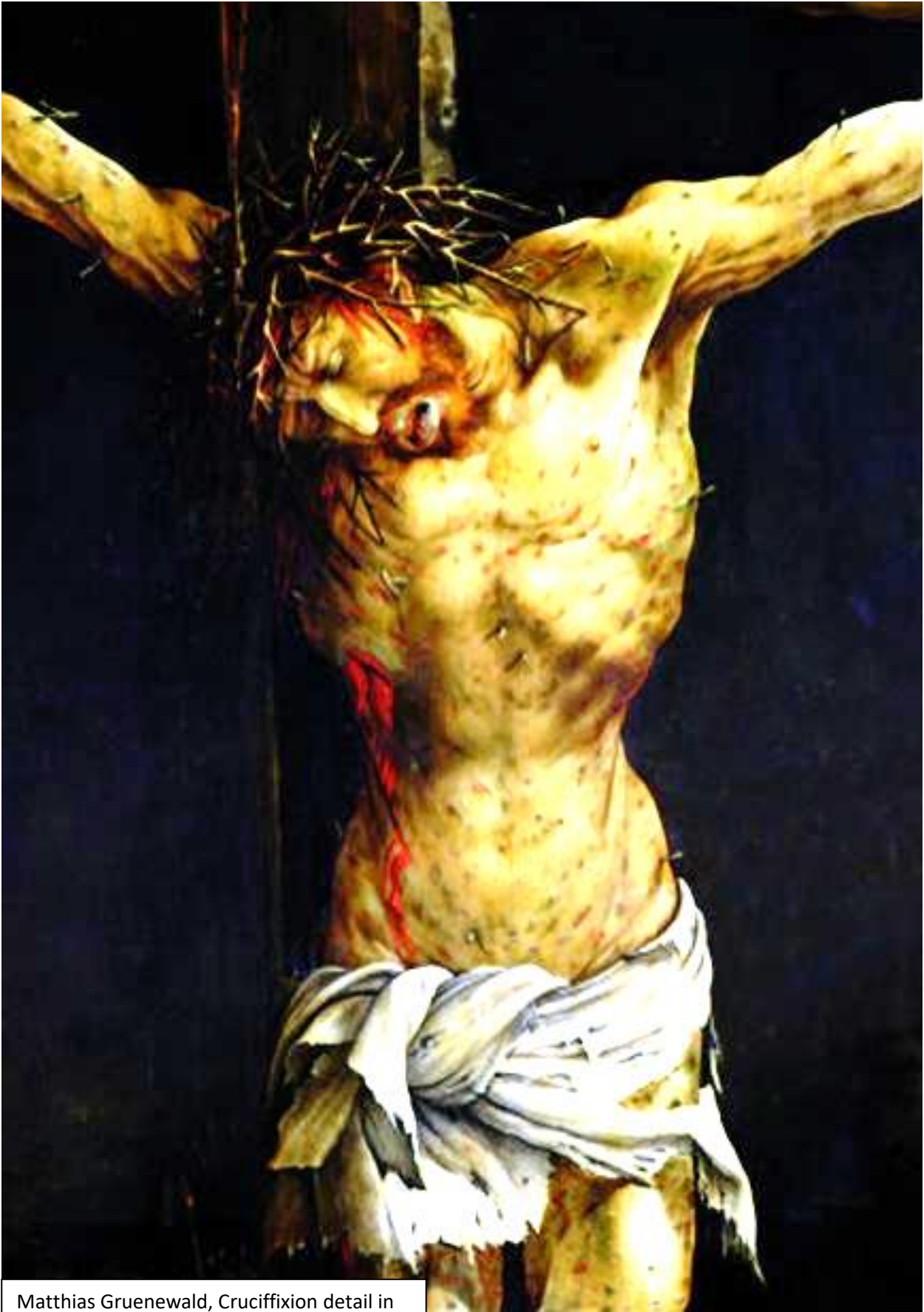
10But it was the LORD's will to crush him with pain. By making his life as a reparation offering,*he shall see his offspring, shall lengthen his days, and the LORD's will shall be accomplished through him.

11Because of his anguish he shall see the light; because of his knowledge he shall be content; My servant, the just one, shall justify the many, their iniquity he shall bear.

12Therefore I will give him his portion among the many, and he shall divide the spoils with the mighty, Because he surrendered himself to death, was counted among the transgressors, Bore the sins of many, and interceded for the transgressors.

Notes:

- For the first time, death is not considered as a curse, but as a salvific event.
- This figure is to be understood first of all as a personification of the people, that was slowly understood a possible individual. The Christians understood this "suffering servant" as an image of Christ.



Matthias Grunewald, Crucifixion detail in
Altar of Isenheim, Colmar (1512-16)

16. Am 2:6-16: Evil under appearance of good

6 Thus says the LORD: "For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment, because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals-- **7** those who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth and turn aside the way of the afflicted; a man and his father go in to the same girl, so that my holy name is profaned; **8** they lay themselves down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge, and in the house of their God they drink the wine of those who have been fined. **9** "Yet it was I who destroyed the Amorite before them, whose height was like the height of the cedars and who was as strong as the oaks; I destroyed his fruit above and his roots beneath. **10** Also it was I who brought you up out of the land of Egypt and led you forty years in the wilderness, to possess the land of the Amorite. **11** And I raised up some of your sons for prophets, and some of your young men for Nazirites. Is it not indeed so, O people of Israel?" declares the LORD. **12** "But you made the Nazirites drink wine, and commanded the prophets, saying, 'You shall not prophesy.' **13** "Behold, I will press you down in your place, as a cart full of sheaves presses down. **14** Flight shall perish from the swift, and the strong shall not retain his strength, nor shall the mighty save his life; **15** he who handles the bow shall not stand, and he who is swift of foot shall not save himself, nor shall he who rides the horse save his life; **16** and he who is stout of heart among the mighty shall flee away naked in that day," declares the LORD.

Notes:

- Through word games (perceptible in Hebrew) he shows how there are forms of violence that are not evident. Even though we have instruments at our service. A distorted interpretation of the Law and an iniquitous relationship with God and neighbor (following the structure of the Decalogue) can be conjugated with a personal and community life that, at least apparently, remains within legality and a "model" religious life.
- The role of the believer, as a prophet, is to reveal the hidden evil, consciously or unconsciously hidden. Amos presents some symbolic and significant examples of this hidden violence:
 - a. If the observance of economic laws leads to the slavery of the brothers, then the law of the Sabbath (which defines the identity of the People as a people freed from slavery) has not been understood.
 - b. If cultural practice is carried out at the expense of the poor, it implicitly renounces the God who has brought down the Amorite in order to give the land to the poor.
- As the voice that is raised against men "who have imprisoned the truth in injustice" (cf. Rom 1:18) is not heard, divine punishment is necessary, which becomes the way through which God reveals the hidden presence of violence and injustice. Although punishment is formidable and should be avoided, it is an act of favor in the face of sinners. By stripping them of their own strength, it becomes salvific "grace", for it reveals sin and destroys it, enabling man to experience life as a gift.

17. Hab 1:2-2:4: Where is God?

1,2 O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save? **3** Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. **4** So the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; so justice goes forth perverted. **5** "Look among the nations, and see; wonder and be astounded. For I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told. **6** For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, who march through the breadth of the earth, to seize dwellings not their own. **7** They are dreaded and fearsome; their justice and dignity go forth from themselves. **8** Their horses are swifter than leopards, more fierce than the evening wolves; their horsemen press proudly on. Their horsemen come from afar; they fly like an eagle swift to devour. **9** They all come for violence, all their faces forward. They gather captives like sand. **10** At kings they scoff, and at rulers they laugh. They laugh at every fortress, for they pile up earth and take it. **11** Then they sweep by like the wind and go on, guilty men, whose own might is their god!" **12** Are you not from everlasting, O LORD my God, my Holy One? We shall not die. O LORD, you have ordained them as a judgment, and you, O Rock, have established them for reproof. **13** You who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong, why do you idly look at traitors and remain silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he? **14** You make mankind like the fish of the sea, like crawling things that have no ruler. **15** He brings all of them up with a hook; he drags them out with his net; he gathers them in his dragnet; so he rejoices and is glad. **16** Therefore he sacrifices to his net and makes offerings to his dragnet; for by them he lives in luxury, and his food is rich. **17** Is he then to keep on emptying his net and mercilessly killing nations forever?

2,1 I will take my stand at my watchpost and station myself on the tower, and look out to see what he will say to me, and what I will answer concerning my complaint. **2** And the LORD answered me: "Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it. **3** For still the vision awaits its appointed time; it hastens to the end--it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay. **4** "Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by his faith.

Notes:

- The prophet's question "Why is this happening?" is not unjust, nor spiritually imperfect. It is the almost obligatory question of those who have experienced violence and injustice. As long as the question exists there is the desire and the possibility of encounter. The desire for justice is expressed as a question that awaits an answer, both "intellectual" (that God "justifies himself") and "experiential" (that God puts an end to violence).
- YHWH's first response invites us to examine history and discover the root of the problem. Conquest and violence are not motivated by economic or political interest, but by the exaltation of one's own strength. This is why wars never end, because the continuous manifestation of power over others is necessary to signify one's own force. This escalation of violence ends up robbing the man of hope. When will it end?
- God commands to write his last vision, the definitive answer that must be written on tables, like the Law. Writing always refers to an uncertain future, which is expected, but which is not immediate. It is a promise that implies faith in that which is not seen.
- The answer is a double promise contained in the last sentence: "the righteous shall live by faith". a. Justice requires keeping faith in God's presence and action even when appearances seem to deny it. Even in death (meaning here in exile). The faithfulness of the righteous implies that he does not adopt the same violent modalities of which he is a victim. b. The faithfulness of the just implies that he does not adopt the same violent modalities of which he is a victim. b. The faithfulness of the just implies that he does not adopt the same violent modalities of which he is a victim. In other words: justice requires persevering patience (cf. Mt 10:22), the culminating expression of which is martyrdom. The mystery of the resurrection is thus glimpsed.

NB: The texts of the New Testament are not reproduced here, but just commented.

18. Mt 5:21-26.38-48: Non-violence

1. Compare with Lk 6:27-30.
2. The attitudes to which Jesus refers are not those of those who have no alternative but to suffer violence. Turning the other cheek, giving up control over loans and, above all, loving one's enemies are attitudes more characteristic of those who have power, of emperors and kings... of those who have received the sovereignty of God's children.
3. Matthew's version emphasizes that this is not a new law, but that the mandate of non-retaliation and loving even the enemy is at the heart of the Law, even though it may conflict with inherited interpretive traditions.
4. Jesus intensifies the content of the Law. In the case of the fifth commandment, he suggests that any kind of contempt for the brother is like murdering him and deserves the same sanction. This intensification is as great as we could imagine, deeply anti-violent in its implications, almost inhuman in what it asks. It reflects a broadening of what constitutes violence by extending what we understand by "lethal" to the breakdown of relationships through disdain and disrespect.
5. In cultures governed by the blood debt, the *law of talion* sought to break the spiral of violence by trying to limit it to a measure of proportionality and equivalence. Jesus' instructions to turn the other cheek, walk another mile, give the whole mantle become transformative initiatives or subversive responses to violence that go beyond acknowledging it and seeking to limit it.
6. Loving the enemy is perfection insofar as it seeks repentance and the restoration of creation. It is mercy, which creates the space for repentance. Moreover, by uniting loving the enemy with filiation, Matthew makes it clear that this is not an exercise in victimhood, but in sovereignty and power, no matter how much, as in the case of Jesus, the Messiah, it may seem impotent in the face of violence.

19. Mt 10:34-39: I have not come to bring peace, but sword

1. These two sayings of Jesus are understood in the context of the so-called "missionary discourse" to the Twelve. After announcing the difficulties that those sent will suffer in the exercise of their mission. Jesus claims the initiative in creating these difficulties for himself: He did not come to bring peace. In this context, Jesus' saying must be understood as that, as a consequence of following the Master, his disciples will be persecuted by friends, enemies and even relatives.
2. The disruption that a political or religious creed introduces into human relations, even the most intimate ones, is made explicit by the sayings about the family. The new identity of the convert-sent divides families into two. Fidelity to Jesus implies a clash with traditional and natural expectations on the part of even the closest: it implies losing one's place in society, especially in a society as cohesive as that of the Palestinian world in the first century. Loss of life does not only refer to the loss of material life (of which martyrdom would be the most *perfect* expression) but also to social isolation.

20. Mt 21:33-46: Status, honor, the Son and the Kingdom

1. In the context of a society such as first-century Palestine, the conflict between rulers and ruled was an intrinsic part of the social structure, linked to values and ideologies rooted in religious, political and economic institutions. Violence was not merely physical or warlike, there was another type of direct or indirect violence, open or camouflaged, which consisted in the coercion of others to maintain a certain *status quo*.
2. From the end of the parable there is an interpretative tradition of this text that has legitimized a certain institutional violence to placate rebel groups: Charles II used it to justify the repression of the Republicans after the restitution of the monarchy in England after the republic of Cromwell; Luther relied on the parable to legitimize the princes who adhered to the Reformation against Catholics; the British took the text to explain their attitude in India during the Victorian era....
3. The parable, however, opposes this type of direct or indirect institutional violence. One of the "twists" of the parable is that what would be considered normal, the connection between status and social power, the privileges of the owner and the normality of his demonstrations of power, lack effectiveness. Jesus thus covertly questions the values of the elite, as they were understood in their environment: status, honor and power. All demonstrations of power and prestige, even the sending of the heir himself, result in failure and death.
4. At the same time, the final turn of history, presented through the quotation of Psalm 118:22, is that precisely in this loss of everything according to the values of the environment, true prestige and honor are numbered. Status and honor are not earned or preserved by one's own prestige or the use of violence. The truly honorable person is the one who keeps from using violence, even socially acceptable violence.

21. Mc 6:19-24: John the Baptist martyrdom

1. Flavius Josephus says in *Antiquities of the Jews* 18:116-119: «Now, some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod's army came from God, and that very justly, as a punishment of what he did against John, that was called the Baptist; for Herod slew him, who was a good man, and commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness towards one another, and piety towards God, and so to come to baptism; for that the washing [with water] would be acceptable to him, if they made use of it, not in order to the putting away [or the remission] of some sins [only], but for the purification of the body; supposing still that the soul was thoroughly purified beforehand by righteousness. Now, when [many] others came in crowds about him, for they were greatly moved [or pleased] by hearing his words, Herod, who feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it into his power and inclination to raise a rebellion (for they seemed ready to do anything he should advise), thought it best, by putting him to death, to prevent any mischief he might cause, and not bring himself into difficulties, by sparing a man who might make him repent of it when it should be too late. Accordingly he was sent a prisoner, out of Herod's suspicious temper, to Macherus, the castle I before mentioned, and was there put to death. Now the Jews had an opinion that the destruction of this army was sent as a punishment upon Herod, and a mark of God's displeasure against him.»
2. Even today, in some regions of the world and at certain levels, marriage is not, in the first instance, a matter of love. Not even lust (as implied in the Gospel passage on the death of the Baptist). For Herod Antipas, marrying Herodias meant a first step in his project to reunite the kingdom of his father Herod the Great, as he claimed for himself the territories of his half-brother Philip. In other words, it was a challenge to the fragile status quo of an ever-expanding region and to imperial control.

3. John the Baptist had an enormous influence on the society of his time, both religious and political (two dimensions that always go hand in hand in Palestine). His criticism of the marriage of Antipas and Herodias was a risk to the political ambitions of the couple. Then as it is today, uncomfortable truths for power are so often silenced through violence.

22. Mk 10:32-45: Power and suffering

1. The third prediction of the Passion, together with the request of the Zebedees, reveals the trauma produced by the abyss between reality and expectations. Mark insists that we follow a suffering Christ, a criminal who has been crucified, but who will rise again. And it is not something that is distant, but that can almost be touched: "we are going up to Jerusalem". For the disciples it is something inexplicable.
2. James and John step forward, asking Jesus to do what they want. They decide to ignore the suffering that Jesus just spoke about to hide in their desires (or delusions) of greatness. While the Master has accepted his own destiny, his disciples prefer to escape from the harshness of reality. Who wants to focus on suffering and violence when he can lead a comfortable life following the precepts of the world?

23. Mk 11:15-19: Violence in/against the Temple

1. The action of Jesus in the Temple is possible from the most historical data that we can assure around his life. It is also defining: his death sentence has much to do with the consequences of what he did there.
2. The context of Mark's Gospel is the Jewish War or the immediate post-war period of the 70's. The destruction of the Temple is a reality that, if it has not already been fulfilled, is imminent and inevitable. The Temple represents all the tradition and identity of the Jews and, in the final rales of the conflict was the scene of various killings and used as a military base for the rebels, called bandits (lestai) by Flavius Josephus, the same term used by Mark when quoting Jer 7:11. The intention of these warlords was to "purify" the true Israel by expelling all the different ones.
3. Jesus acts in a violent or at least provocative way because he intends to put an end to this oppressive and violent dynamic of the systematic exclusion of the different, of the foreigner, whose space had been occupied by all kinds of merchants and who, at the time of the evangelist, were violently expelled from Jerusalem. Creating a house of prayer for all nations means not only recovering the original vocation of the Temple, but at the same time creating a space of relationship and dialogue in which all can be represented.
4. Another layer of interpretation of the text is given by Jn 2:13-21: The proclamation of the destruction of the Temple presupposes a transformation of identity, always violent.

24. Mk 13,1-37: Hope in wartime

1. The immediate context of Mark's gospel is the Jewish post-war war of the year 70. The destruction of the Temple is a reality that, if it has not already been fulfilled, is imminent and inevitable. The Temple represents the entire tradition and identity of the Jews. The question of the disciples to Jesus after the announcement of the destruction of the Temple is equivalent to saying: "Is there hope when our world collapses?"
2. Jesus' first response is a call not to be carried away by the urgencies of the present world. Those "other Christs" and "false prophets" are the military warlords and ideologues who emerged everywhere in Palestine in those years and who would reappear years later in Hadrian's time.

With fantasies of power and empty rhetoric they brought misfortune, war and suffering to the people. Silencing the voices that incite violence is the first step towards overcoming it.

3. The perseverance that Jesus calls is only possible when what the Second Vatican Council called the signs of the times are correctly interpreted. There are some signs that are deceptive, like the fig leaves, and the believer must learn to discern them and act accordingly. The attitude of vigilance implies a deep commitment to reality
4. The Gospel is precisely good news because in the midst of suffering it makes us experience that evil and violence do not have the last word. The victory of the armies of the Son of Man is not presented as a great military victory, but as the gathering (reconciliation) of those who have been dispersed by war.

25. Lk 24:13-35: Make sense of suffering

1. One of the consequences of violence is the rupture of dreams and hopes it provokes. This is the situation in which the Church remains, represented by the disciples walking towards Emmaus. Their hopes have been broken by violence against the one who incarnated them.
2. Jesus enters the scene as a stranger who physically approaches those who return defeated. He is a stranger because, in Cleophas' own words, he is one "who does not know" what has happened in Jerusalem, that is, he does not know what is in his heart. This distance established by ignorance,
3. The irony will reveal that the true ignorant ("slow and awkward") are the disciples. But it is not the "intellectual" explanation that reconstructs the hope of Cleophas and his companion. Only the recognition of the Master, which becomes mutual recognition, is able to bring joy back to their hearts.
4. From the beginning in the Gospel, especially in Luke, the transformative value of the violence exercised against Jesus has been revealed. More than anything else, it becomes the door of New Life. There is always a way beyond violence against him. Evil does not have the last word.

26. Jn 12:20-33: Accepting violence against oneself

1. The moments before the Passion are, in all the Gospels, moments to which we are presented with the "troubled" Jesus. Accepting the violence he will suffer in the next few hours is a tremendous challenge for the man Jesus. The Synoptics (Gethsemane) insist on their obedience to the Father. John also adds the testimonial value of Jesus' death.
2. Beyond its redemptive dimension, John's Gospel insists on the revealing power of the Cross and suffering. The way of accepting suffering and violence against oneself becomes the great mirror in which all will be judged. Thus it has been announced throughout the Gospel, speaking of the hour, and so it is now made explicit. The suffering of the innocent, especially of the Innocent (with a capital I), and the way in which they accept it reveals the truth that is in each one's heart and brings to light the Prince of this World, whose realm is lies and murder (cf. Jn 8:44).

27. Jn 20:19-31: Walls and wounds in the Way of Life

1. We are used to say that the gospel is a message of peace. And it is. But we are also used to confusing peace with "being left in peace". To achieve this, we build walls around us that separate us from the other, believing that we are looking for security, but nourishing only the fear of the

other. In our territorial borders, but also in the borders of our own life, these walls only serve to generate violence. Peace can only be experienced when these walls are crossed.

2. Nor is it possible to achieve true peace until the wounds we have experienced are healed. What we call loss is a form of change that generates a state of deep insecurity, the more it affects that safe house that we have built for ourselves. In order to be able to continue one's own life - in order to reach the Life that one reaches through faith - it is fundamental to be able to integrate one's own wounds and to discover how in spite of them or precisely because of them we can discover a life that goes on, although in a different way.

28. Acts 7:1-8,4: Stephen, rejection and the blood of martyrs

1. The whole story of Stephen's martyrdom, from the beginning of his discourse, is the story of a great conflict of identities and interpretations. The accusation is that he wants to change the customs that Moses has bequeathed. He wanted to change the centre of the People's life. Stephen will respond with a long speech, but his destiny seems sealed before he begins. In fact, they will not even let him finish speaking.
2. There is an idea that recurs through the whole discourse of the first martyr several times: the rejection of the one who is sent to change the way of life (Moses in 7:23-29.35 as the prefiguration of Jesus).
3. The story of martyrdom ends by saying that those who dispersed because of Stephen's death were proclaiming the Word of God. The New Testament is traversed by references of style. The testimony of the victims of persecution and their perseverance in difficulties and suffering was a sign of hope in the good news. As Tertullian said: "*sanguis martyrum, semen christianorum*" ("The blood of the martyrs is the seed of Christians").



Nicolò Circignani (il Pomarancio), *Martyrdom of St. Stefan*, 1583, Santo Stefano Rotondo (Rome)

29. Acts 9:1-26: Fundamentalism and the aftermath

1. It could be complemented with the reading of Gal 1-2 or Phil 3.
2. Paul "breathed death threats. He himself defines himself as what we would today call a fundamentalist (cf. Gal 1:13; Phil 3:4-6). His conception of religion implied a radical and violent opposition against everything that was different or that threatened his integrity and orthodoxy, to the point of transforming what should be a source of life into a source of death.
3. Can a violent person (re)integrate himself into the society against which he has exercised violence? Saul decides to change his life after a liberating experience. But he must integrate his past into his new life, so that it does not become a flight forward. All of Paul's theology, especially that which refers to salvation in Christ, emanates from his effort to integrate his past as a persecutor with the experience of having been forgiven.
4. The repentance of the violent is only the face of a coin in this process. Society must welcome it. Ananias and the Jerusalem community distrust Paul. Is it possible that the one who once breathed the violence of death is now on our side? The "authorized" people (the Spirit and Barnabas) must watch over him to ensure that this process is sincere, but the history of the first communities shows how distrust of Paul was a source of conflict throughout the 1950s.

30. Acts 19:23-41: Religion, economy and violence

1. The riot that emerges in Ephesus is not so much caused by the contrast between two different life forms or two opposing identities. The socio-cultural environment of the Eastern Mediterranean fostered encounters between people of different backgrounds and cultures. As in any human enterprise, an economic and social system also arises around religion, which is called into question when a "change of era" arrives. Then one reacts against novelty, not because it is different, but because it is new and perceived as a threat, even if one resorts to identity arguments such as the Artemis of the Ephesians.
2. The relationship between spiritual realities and material-economic realities is always a cause of conflict.

31. Rev 12: War and violence as an explanation of reality

1. We must read this vision as the consequence of what happens at the end of chapter 11. In 11,19 the Temple is opened and the Ark of the Covenant appears. The meaning of history will be revealed and, as it happened in ancient times, it is done through a myth, that is to say, through a story that explains the profound meaning of reality.
2. Two powerful signs appear: the Woman and the Dragon. Woman and Dragon seem to be united in the popular ideology of the very diverse cultures. The story of the hero who saves the princess from the jaws of the beast, protects her and marries her, also echoes in the Apocalypse. At the end of the story, the hero, the Lamb, will marry the Woman. But their differences appear: the hero is not only Prince Charming, he is, at the same time, the son of the Woman.
3. The figure of the dragon, snake, crocodile or sea monster is a familiar figure in ancient mythology and the Hebrew Bible. In Jewish writings, it often serves as a symbol of an oppressive nation, such as Egypt (Ps 74:14) and its ruler Pharaoh (Ez 32:2ff), or as Syria and Babylon (Is 27:1). Daniel uses this symbol in reference to the last great antidivine nation and its ruler, opponent of Israel (7,1-7). In this symbolic context, readers can perceive in the red dragon the ultimate enemy of

God's people. Their seven heads and ten horns crowned with diadems represent the earthly demystifying power (for it brings down the stars of the sky).

4. In the context of Revelation, the woman dressed in the sun, traditionally understood as Mary, represents the Messianic community. She groans in pains, for she is still waiting for the definitive manifestation of the Messiah, the child to be born.
5. The image of "war in heaven" is connected to that of judgment, where Satan functions as prosecutor and Michael as defender of God's people. While in heaven the battle has already been defeated, this world is still waiting for its fulfilment, so there is suffering.

32. Rev 19:11-21: The ultimate battle

1. Since the times of the Exodus it is common to encounter the image of God as a warrior. God is the God of armies who takes the side of his people to liberate them. However, it is provocative for God to represent himself as a violent agent who takes sides for some to the detriment of others. The final battle of Revelation that is read in this chapter takes this image to the extreme: Christ definitively defeats all who oppose Him.
2. In this passage, the eschatological battle is a bloody affair. Gathering some prophetic image and a very human reality, the victory of the heavenly army is obtained through the shedding of blood (cf. Is 63:3), but it is not the blood of the enemies, but that of the Lamb, who triumphed because of his suffering, a refrain that has been repeated throughout the book. The vision thus connects the two sides of the coin of the representation of Christ in the book of Revelation: the glorious triumphant knight in golden garments and the lamb that has been beheaded.
3. The victory of the white rider offers a model for those who follow him and who will triumph in the eschatological battle and does so from the point of view of those who feel marginalized as God's people, because they too feel and suffer how their blood is being shed in the persecutions.

33. Rev 21: The end of all violence

1. After the ultimate battle and the judgment of the world, comes the conclusive vision of Revelation: the New Jerusalem. The "first" heaven and earth now belong to the past, for they were the fruit of the antagonistic dualism between the reign of God and Christ in heaven and the reign of the dragon and his allies on earth and in the abyss. The "new heaven and new earth" are in continuity with the heaven and earth of before, but they form a qualitatively new and unified world. In fact, it could be said that heaven has descended to earth. Christians who have been persecuted and fought for defending God's empire on earth and opposing the Babylon/Rome empire are now victorious.
2. The description of the heavenly city borrows two images of power that have been the source of violence and "transfigures" them into symbols of peace:
 - a. The walls are small in comparison with the city. They no longer serve to separate, but to bring two realities into contact. The wall represents the Church, founded on the Twelve, which unites the reality of God's city with the rest of Creation. Its doors, in fact, are always open.
 - b. The throne, symbol of judicial, real, imperial power, is the place from where the leaders of this world have subjugated nations and the powerful have tyrannized them. b. The throne, symbol of judicial, real, imperial power, is the place from where the leaders of this world have subjugated nations and the powerful have tyrannized them. Just as the Babylonian/Rome city-world represented the Roman Empire, which housed in its

enclosures the political power and commercial wealth of the nations and their rulers, so too will the New Jerusalem make its own the power and splendor of the nations. But while Babylon/Rome misused its power and wealth by destroying and corrupting the earth, the eschatological vision of God's universal empire promises new life, health, and happiness. The throne (symbol of God's power from which all judgments emanate) now becomes the source of eternal life and happiness (22:1-3).

N.B. Another possible pathway of prayer about “violence” in the NT is simply to follow the whole text of the Passion of one of the four Gospels.



Wooden bust of Christ (14th cent.), MNAC, Barcelona



Croce di San Damiano,
12th cent., Assisi

This pathway has been prepared by the “central coordination team” of the “Living Stones – Pietre Vive” international network. Many of the texts have been selected and commented on by the biblical scholar Rev. Ricardo Sanjurjo (“Piedras Vivas – Santiago de Compostela”)

Does religion cause violence? Why is there so much violence in the Bible? This booklet provides a pathway of prayer based on 33 texts of the Bible which reveal how violence has been seriously considered and analysed as part of human experience, one that cannot be ignored as it opens a space for the deep encounter with God. Salvation, thus, means transfiguration of violence into awareness of the love of God, creativity, and testimony.



Antoni Gaudí, *Slaughter of innocents*, 1920, Sagrada Família, Barcelona

Living Stones is a pathway of formation in faith. Besides a serious intellectual formation (art history and theology), each member of Living Stones receives a spiritual formation which annually consists in a pathway composed of biblical meditations revolving a central theme of faith. This booklet contains the biblical texts for this spiritual itinerary. Every text is chosen and commented with the aim of being meditated by the local “Living Stones” group during its prayer meetings. The introduction provides a historical-theological framework that assists the one leading the prayer to contextualise the text within the perspective of the yearly theme. The whole booklet forms an ideal itinerant preparation for the international Living Stones formation meeting which will be held in Malta on 30 April – 3 May 2020. The theme will be: “Art, Violence and Religion”.

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