

YAHWEH, THE GOD OF THE TENT

A Theological Reflection on the Scalabrinian Mission

I believe we are in the middle of a momentous season in the history of our congregation. We are fast approaching the third millennium, as Pope John Paul II likes to remind us, and this closeness to the beginning a new era in human history almost forces us to ask the hard questions about our identity, our mission, our relevance and significance as a religious congregation within the Church and the world. To acquire a searching and questioning heart during this particular time could be of crucial importance for our future as a religious group. The upcoming conference on Scalabrinian spirituality in October and the meeting of all the religious brothers in May may be signs of our willingness to walk on this path. The conference on Scalabrinian spirituality, in particular, should represent for us a significant moment of search for our missionary identity and, most of all, for the Spirit who guides and energizes our mission among the migrants. The theme of this assembly, "The Parish as a Place for Scalabrinian Mission", can be understood properly only if we look at it within this broader picture.

I would start by saying that the theme of our assembly is a controversial one among Scalabrinians. Some of us think, more or less openly, that our Scalabrinian mission is not compatible, to use a computer jargon, with the needs and structural constraints of parish ministry. Some of us say that for our mission among the migrants we do not need pastors or parish priests, but missionaries. I know this must sound disturbing in our province where the primary basis of our pastoral activity is the parish, but at the same time I insist that we have to deal with these hard questions for the sake of our future mission with the migrants. If we look at this problem within the broader picture, as I have suggested earlier, we realize that the real issue is not whether we have to work in the field of parish ministry or not. The real issue goes well beyond the parish as a place of Scalabrinian mission. The real issue at stake here is the Scalabrinian mission itself. What is the Scalabrinian mission? This is the question that we have to answer if we want to give meaning and relevance to our ministry wherever we are. My reflections here are my modest contribution to the process of answering this basic question.

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It is my conviction that the missiological issue we are dealing with is first of all a theological issue. What we have to do first of all is to return to the origin of mission itself: God. In this process we realize right away that in reality the primary question is not what is our mission but, rather, who is our God? The Chilean theologian Ronaldo Muñoz rightly observes that the basic theological question for Christians is not whether God exists or not, but who is the true God and how can we know and recognize this God in our lives and history.¹ So the first important step is to ask ourselves: Who is the true God? Who is the God we Scalabrinians believe in and are following in our lives and ministries? These are the questions that touch the mystery of our lives and God's life. These are the questions that each believer is supposed to struggle with until the end of his or her life and obviously here we have neither the possibility nor the ambition to answer them exhaustively. Nevertheless, it is essential for us to find an

¹ Muñoz, R. *Dios de Los Cristianos* (Madrid: Ediciones Paulinas, 1987) 21.

initial answer to our questions by returning to the point of departure of our Christian faith, which is the religious experience of the people of Israel as we find it in the Old Testament.

A first look at the Old Testament is indeed very inspiring and challenging for us as Scalabrinians. The faith experience of the people of Israel reveals a God who accompanies them in their history through good and bad times. Yahweh is primarily a God who walks with the people. This becomes evident in the first encounter of our ancestor Abraham with Yahweh in Gen 12:1-4. Here Abraham is called to leave his homeland and start a journey whose goal is Yahweh's promise of a great descendance, a promised land, and a blessing which includes all the nations of the earth. Most importantly, this text reveals a crucial dimension of God's identity which will remain constant throughout the Old and New Testament: "one thing makes this god different from the divinities found just about everywhere in those days. All those deities were linked to particular places - mountains, rivers, cities, regions - whereas the god that speaks to Abraham is a god who is not tied down to one spot. This god is a sojourner god, a pilgrim god."²

Yahweh is not a static, sedentary God, but a migrant God who is always present in the journey of the people of Israel (Pss 68:7-8; 77:19-20). This is especially true during the foundational Exodus experience of Israel when "the Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people." (Exod 13:21-22). Yahweh never leaves Israel in its pilgrimage: Yahweh is the true Leader of this journey, the Presence who gives a sense of orientation and direction. Israel, in turn, will always remember in its profession of faith and in the celebration of its liturgy this God of the wandering, of the slaves and the homeless (Deut 26:1-11). The period in which the people walked toward the promised land living in tents with their God represents the cornerstone of Israel's identity and faith. In spite of the many problems of this journey through the wilderness and the "murmurings" of the people who would rather go back to slavery in Egypt than walk in the path of freedom, Yahweh was able to guide Israel to the land "flowing with milk and honey".

A new problem arises when Israel settles down in the promised land. The people start to give in to the temptation of a comfortable life mindless of God's commandments of freedom, love and justice. Israel and its leaders forget Yahweh and what they had learned in their journey through the wilderness. It is for this reason that Yahweh, through the prophets' scathing critique of the sinful comfortableness of Israel's settled life, will call the people back to their tents (Hos 12:10).

One of the Old Testament texts that better reveals the tension that emerged in Israel's life at the time of its final settlement into a monarchy is 2Sam 7. It is not my purpose to elaborate a thorough exegesis of this text. It is enough to say here that this is, exegetically and ideologically, a quite difficult and controversial text. Some Old Testament scholars consider it the climax of royal theology.³ My own interpretation of 2Sam 7 will focus on vv 1-7 because this first part of the text emphasizes Yahweh's initial disagreement with the building of the temple. This represents the neglected voice of this passage since later on in this text God

² Brother John of Taizé. *The Pilgrim God. A Biblical Journey* (Washington D.C.: Pastoral, 1985) 13.

³ Brueggemann, W. *David's Truth in Israel's Imagination & Memory* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 74: "Here we meet the highest royal theology in Israel."

establishes the royal dynasty (vv 11-12) and, in spite of refusing at first, gives permission to build the temple (v 13) which will remain for some centuries the religious and liturgical center of the Jewish religion until its destruction in 70 CE by the Romans. I will emphasize this neglected voice because I believe that it is the more relevant to our Scalabrinian mission.

The first three verses are crucial for our understanding of this text because they portray the context in which the scene takes place. The great king David has already settled in his house, a house of cedar, and Yahweh has made him secure from all his enemies. At this point David expresses to the prophet Nathan his desire to build a temple to Yahweh. The reason he gives is a noble one: it is not fair that the king lives in the luxury of a house of cedar while Yahweh's ark, the symbol of God's presence among the people, stays in a tent. Nathan gives him the "go ahead" signal with the assurance that Yahweh is with him in this project (vv 1-3). The claim to build the temple made by David is surely reflective of a situation of economic affluence, he lives in a house of cedar, and social stability, he is secure from all his enemies.⁴ Apparently the last step to be taken to definitively establish and solidify his monarchy is the construction of a temple to the God who has assisted him throughout his life. This seems so evident that not even the prophet, who is supposed to be God's messenger, questions David's idea.

However, we get the impression that a decision has been made by the king and the prophet without consulting their true Leader Yahweh. As a consequence Yahweh takes the initiative and speaks to Nathan that same night. It is a surprising message: God has never asked for a house of cedar to live in. Since the time of Israel's liberation from the Egyptian slavery Yahweh has always been moving about in a tent, leading the people of Israel in its journey. Why should Yahweh ask for a temple? God's objection to the building of the temple represents a fundamental refusal of a static religion, a refusal on the part of God to live in a temple, a fixed and static space, because God wants to continue to be the God of the tent, the traveler God who always walks with Israel in its journey. God want to be free to come and go with the people of Israel: "We have here a marvelously free God who does not yearn for a temple in ways characteristic of Canaanite deities."⁵ Here the God of Israel strongly reasserts in front of the king, the prophet, and the whole people the divine identity: Yahweh is the God of the tent. Very interestingly this essential element of God's identity as a migrant God reappears forcefully in the New Testament revealing an often ignored continuity between Yahweh, the God of Israel and the God of Jesus Christ. First of all, the author of the Gospel of John tells us in its famous prologue that Jesus, the Word become flesh, "pitched his tent" among us (John 1:14). In fact, the Greek verb which is often translated as "dwell" is *eskenosen* which comes from the term *skene* which means tent.⁶ God does not want to abandon the tent and in Jesus God pitches a tent once again in the midst of humanity in order to bring light and salvation to all. Secondly, Jesus himself is portrayed by the Synoptic Gospels as always being on the road, as the itinerant prophet and teacher who brings the Good News of the Reign of God to all the people he encounters. In Jesus we see again the God of the tent, the God who does not expect people to go toward God, but

⁴ Brueggemann, W. *Old Testament Theology. Essays on Structure, Theme and Text* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 131.

⁵ Brueggemann, *David's Truth*, 74.

⁶ One theologian whom I have found attentive to this important detail is Gutierrez, G. *We Drink from Our Own Wells. The Spiritual Journey of a People* (New York: Orbis Books, 1984) 41.

lives among the people and journeys with them.

This particular thread of the biblical tradition gives an initial answer to our original question: Who is the true God? In my view, it is urgent for us as Scalabrinians to discover or rediscover the true God as the God of the tent, the migrant God who travels with the people. This God witnessed to by Scriptures is extremely relevant to our mission among people who are mobile by definition: migrants.

THE SCALABRINIAN MISSION

Yahweh, the God of the tent, calls us to reshape the way we view and perform our mission. Here I will just highlight a few points that I see as essential to a proper understanding of our specific mission. First, God tells us that we are neither the protagonists nor the ones in charge of the mission to the migrants. **This mission is not ours.** This must be very clear if we do not want to work in vain. Strictly speaking, not even the Scalabrinian charism belongs to us. Gustavo Gutierrez rightly affirms that the term "charism" in its strict sense means a gift given to a person for the benefit of the whole community.⁷ So the Scalabrinian charism is a gift given by God to Bishop Scalabrini for the benefit of the whole people of God. This confirms the fact that we are not the protagonists of the mission to the migrants, but that **God is the true protagonist**, the God of the tent who walks with them. We are just servants and instruments of God's mission.

Second, we have to be more focused on the goal of this mission. Evidently, it is not our task to decide what this goal is going to be. That is God's task. Often we act as if we are the ones to decide, according to the situation, what is the goal of mission. We must strongly assert that the goal of God's mission to the migrants is not the survival of our congregation no matter what nor is it the preservation of our Scalabrinian churches and mission centers at all cost. The mission to the migrants is not for ourselves, but for the migrant people of God. Its ultimate goal is not the Scalabrinian congregation nor the Catholic church, but the Reign of God.

Third, we are invited to follow the God of the tent in this mission with the migrants. This is not an easy task because we are called by God to prepare our own tent and leave our land and security behind just as Abraham did. Fidelity to God will mean to go wherever the God of the tent goes. The greatest temptation against fidelity to God and our Scalabrinian mission, especially in the field of parish ministry, is to settle down, to become used to stability, to become static ministers, and content with routinary sacramental ministry. This would represent, in my view, a slap in the face to the God of the tent and the denial of the mission this God invites us to: a mission which by definition is mobile and dynamic precisely because we have been called to minister in the field of human mobility. Jon Sobrino in a profound reflection on the meaning of religious life today gives us three important signposts as to where we are to follow the God of the tent. He says that as religious we are called to perform our prophetic ministry in the **desert**, in the **periphery**, and at the **frontier**. "In the desert" means that the religious has to work where nobody works or wants to work. "In the periphery" means that the religious has to be present not at the center where the power is and where decisions that rule the world are taken, but rather at the margins where there is no power only impotence. "And at the frontier" means that the religious has to be present where there is need to experiment in the pastoral field, where we

⁷ Gutierrez, G. *El Dios de la Vida* (Salamanca: Ediciones Sigueme, 1992) 312.

have to use our Christian creativity and imagination; where there is more risk, and so there is more need to denounce sin and to be a prophetic voice in the world, and also in a Church that often need to be shaken out of their lethargy, indifference and idleness.⁸ The pertinence of Sobrino's reflection for us as Scalabrinians is just striking when we realize that the migrants are to be found especially in the desert, in the periphery and at the frontiers of our societies. In this regard I would like to make a proposal that I believe will help us to be faithful to our God and mission. We know quite well that monastic religious congregations like the Benedictines besides taking the three traditional religious vows make a fourth vow of stability which is relevant to their contemplative identity. Following their lead I strongly suggest that we Scalabrinians as missionaries for and with the migrants make a fourth vow, not one of stability, but on the contrary, a vow of **mobility**. This vow will underline and deepen our commitment to the God of the tent and to the Scalabrinian charism and mission among the migrants. This proposal should not be simply taken as a provocation, but as a challenge to each one of us to truly fulfill our vocation and be the missionaries we are supposed to be.

Fourth, if we commit ourselves to follow the God of the tent, we have to be willing to let go of our past. I am not saying here that we have to forget or reject our history because I firmly believe that our past traditions are the foundations of our identity. What I mean by letting go of our past is, as Gerald Arbuckle puts it, to "grieve over, and not deny, what has been lost or has become pastorally irrelevant".⁹ Often we can fall into the trap of spending too much of our precious time and energy in remembering nostalgically how nice and neat was our past. While it is true that we will never learn enough from our past, it is also true that we do not live in the past, but in a fast-changing present and a fast-approaching future. In other words, we do not have to forget our past, but grieve over it so that we can make space in our lives for the newness of the present and the future. We do not have to use our imagination and creativity to restore that which is already lost and useless to retrieve, but to find new forms of ministry which are relevant and meaningful to the migrants today. So what we need is a spirituality of grieving, but also one of transformation which moves us with hope, faith, and courage into the future.¹⁰

I started this reflection by saying that for the future of our congregation it will be crucial to acquire a searching and questioning heart. So let us search and question our hearts to see if there is room for our God who is always new and full of surprises. Yahweh, the God of the tent, the God of our migrant ancestors, the God of Jesus our Savior is asking us to open our hearts to the ever-changing and uncertain world of migration. Let us take up the challenge of our God of the tent who is asking us to be radically faithful to our charism. Let us have the courage and the faith to leave our "temples" which make us passive and static missionaries so that we can continue our journey with God and our people on the move.

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⁸ Sobrino, J. *Resurreccion de la Verdadera Iglesia. Los Pobres, Lugar Teologico de la Eclesiologia* (Santander: Editorial Sal Terrae, 1981) 335.

⁹ Arbuckle, G.A. *Change, Grief, and Renewal in the Church. A Spirituality for a New Era* (Westminster, Maryland: Christian Classics, 1991) 3.

¹⁰ The ideas that I express in this paragraph are inspired by and taken from Arbuckle's excellent book, *Change, Grief and Renewal in the Church*, which proposes precisely a spirituality of grieving and refounding as a very urgent task for our Christian communities and religious groups today.