

Attention

Words of Spirituality

by ENZO BIANCHI

A condition of watchfulness and lucidity against all of the inclinations of the human mind that tend to debase it

The Christian tradition has defined *prosoché*, 'attention,' as an attitude of 'concentration,' an inner 'stretching toward,' a 'focusing of the mind.' The Greek word has a dynamic connotation, as do the Latin *attentio* and *attendere*, which tells us that someone who is attentive is someone who 'reaches' toward something. Attention is not the activity of a particular human faculty as much as a movement of the entire person, body and spirit. Once have we discovered the meaning, center and goal of our existence, attention becomes the unification of our actions in the light of that goal, our profound dedication to that center. Growing in attention means growing in personal unification. Asian forms of ascetic discipline and meditation are profoundly familiar with attention: in Buddhism, it is through attention that one reaches a penetrating vision of reality, a way of seeing that the desert fathers and the Christian tradition have called *diorsis* (seeing in depth, beyond appearances and exteriors). In Christianity, *prosoché* derives from the Jewish teaching called *kawwanah*, which indicates inner attention and vigilance of the heart and senses in one's relationship with God, attachment of one's entire being to the words of prayer and Scripture, and most importantly, attachment to the presence of God reached through these words.

This is why attention, in the Christian tradition, is requested in particular during the celebration of the liturgy (*opus Dei*) and during personal reading of the Bible (*lectio divina*). But attention is a reality whose meaning is infinitely deeper. It is a lucid 'presence to oneself' that becomes discernment of the presence of God in the human person. Basil, commenting on the Bible verse "Be on your guard" (Deuteronomy 15:9), writes, "Pay attention to yourself if you want to pay attention to God." This attention to ourselves means resisting the thoughts that dis-tract us by drawing us away from our center, and it becomes a way of guarding the heart: "Attention is the silence of the heart uninterrupted by thoughts" (Hesychius of Batos). There is an aspect of struggle inherent in attention that involves keeping watch over the thoughts that appear in the heart, recognizing their nature and origin, destroying those that are harmful, and resisting the suggestion of a harmful thought before it becomes dialogue (inner conversation with the thought) and results in action, or consumption of sin. Through this process, attention purifies the heart and becomes prayer. The Greek fathers took advantage of the similarity between the words *prosoché* (attention) and *proseuché* (prayer) to demonstrate how closely the two realities are related to each other. "Attention that seeks prayer will find it, because prayer follows attention, and it is to the latter that we should apply ourselves" (Evagrius Ponticus); "Total attention is an aspect of continuous prayer" (Hesychius of Batos).

Closer to our era, Simone Weil, rephrasing Malebranche, has also spoken of attention in terms of prayer: "Attention, at its highest degree, is the same thing as prayer. It implies faith and love. Attention that is absolutely pure is prayer." Such a condition of watchfulness and lucidity goes against all of the inclinations of the human mind that tend to debase it, such as laziness, drowsiness, negligence, superficiality, scattering of one's thoughts, and *divertissement* (dis-traction). Because of the constant struggle it requires, attention is extremely difficult and costs us a great deal. Simone Weil continues, "There is something in our soul that shrinks from true attention much more violently than the body draws back from physical strain." Through attention, our 'I' is simplified and reduced to the essential: it 'falls' and is drawn into the 'object' of our desire. We realize, through our attention, that what makes us truly live is that upon which we focus our desire, longing, and love. Attention makes present the one who is longed for and desired. These words of St. Paul clarify what all of this means in Christian terms: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me, and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).

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