

Anxiety: when the pillars shake

«When the earth and all its people quake, it is I who hold its pillars firm»
(Psalm 75:3 NIV).

«You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you (God)»
(Isaiah 26:3 ESV).

Uncertainty, restlessness, insecurity are our inseparable companions these days in a world afflicted by the pandemic. We cannot shake off a strange and annoying sensation of oppression, sometimes so intense that it seems as if we lack air. “I can't take it anymore, I am choking”. Yes, it is anxiety, it is anguish. Living with anxiety is like crossing a narrow gorge between mountains, with little light and a lot of risk (the word *angst*, from the original *angustus*, means narrow). There is danger, but above all there is uncertainty and concern: what will happen?

The pillars of our life tremble and it seems that the world is going to sink under our feet. However safe and self-sufficient we felt, a virus has reminded us of the fragility of life and has brought us face to face with death. Never before has our generation in the West experienced a situation of such insecurity in so many areas at once (health, work, the economy, moral values).

All this forces us to look for more solid pillars, pillars that are not at the mercy of the first strong storm. What is really important? What is essential in this life? How can I alleviate this anxiety that won't leave me alone?

Where does anxiety come from? Anxiety is a multidimensional problem in which social, psychological, biological and spiritual factors are mixed. We cannot disregard any of them, so that the sociologist, psychotherapist, or psychiatrist can help alleviate anxiety. Their therapeutic contributions are welcome. However, none of them can get to the bottom of the problem, to the root where anxiety originates. A better society, a more balanced mind, a healthier brain biochemistry cannot completely end the problem of human anxiety. Why?

The absence of vital meaning is the basic problem that causes anxiety. The ultimate cause of anxiety lies in **the lack of meaning and purpose in life**. What do I live for? What is the purpose of my life? Lack of satisfactory answers to these questions leads to deep anxiety that is experienced as a feeling of vital disorientation and emptiness. We call it **existential anxiety**. It is no coincidence that one of the most read books in the second half of the 20th century was “*Man in search for meaning*” by the psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, a survivor of Nazi concentration camps. Recognized thinkers, believers and non-believers, identify the basic problem of the person as the absence of vital meaning.

Love does not cure everything. Obviously, this anxiety goes far beyond clinical symptoms (panic attacks, obsessive thoughts, phobias, etc.) and cannot be explained in terms of a medical, psychological, biographical, or social problem. It is a void that nothing seems to fill, a void described by the author of Ecclesiastes as «vanity of vanities,

everything is vanity» (Eccl. 1:2 ESV). Sartre went even further and referred to this inner discomfort as “nausea”. Something is missing and something is wrong.

How to deal with this deep concern that is not alleviated with anxiolytics or psychotherapy or social reforms? According to existential psychotherapists, the solution lies in finding **meaningful and enriching relationships**. The therapeutic key, they say, is found in a genuine relationship with your neighbour, a relationship where there is mutual love. This is the main instrument of healing.

This view coincides, in part, with the biblical diagnosis. **God created human beings in great need of relationships**. «It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him» (Gen. 2:18 ESV). As created in the image and likeness of God, we are born with a deep desire for contact with a “you”. The recent confinement has shown how important relationships are. Isolation withers us like a plant without water.

The “Nostalgia for the Absolute”. The reality, however, shows us that many people with satisfactory social relationships do not have peace, they lack that inner harmony that the Bible calls *Shalom*. Relationship with our neighbour, however good it may be, does not completely fill that void. The restlessness persists, there is still “something” difficult to describe that is missing. George Steiner, a prominent contemporary agnostic thinker, refers to this void as a “*nostalgia for the absolute*”. According to him, this nostalgia is the result of the moral vacuum that exists in western culture due to the decline of conventional religions. Steiner certainly points in the right direction.

The “God-shaped void”. Blaise Pascal went further than Steiner. The great French scientist described this idea with a memorable thought:

“There is a God-shaped void in the heart of each man which cannot be satisfied by any created thing but only by God the Creator, made known through Jesus Christ”.

We long not for a “something”, but rather a “Someone”. Pascal, a profound connoisseur of the Bible, undoubtedly must have been inspired by the psalmist who describes this existential anxiety with penetrating words:

«As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God» (Ps. 42:1-2 ESV)... «For God alone my soul waits in silence; for my hope is from him» (Ps. 62:1, 5 ESV)... «My soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water» (Ps. 63:1 ESV).

The problem is not that something is missing but that Someone is missing. Man can proclaim the death of God, as Nietzsche did, but *he cannot quench his thirst for God*. We find here the ultimate answer to anxiety: **our need for relationships is two-way**, with our neighbour and with our Creator. We need to relate to a human “you”, but also to the divine You. God. This was the original situation of man. It is not surprising, therefore, that the eminent psychiatrist C.G. Jung said “I have never seen a single case of neurosis that ultimately had no existential origin”.

Separation from God is the ultimate cause of anxiety. According to the Biblical account, in the beginning there were no emotional problems; there was no fear, no

shame, no pain in the original situation in which God placed the human being. The close relationship with the Creator gave him fullness of life and complete peace.

Anxiety arose as soon as he turned away from God. Let's look at the biblical text: «**I was afraid ... and I hid myself**» (Gen. 3:10 ESV). There is a cause-effect relationship: the first mention of anxiety in history appears when the human being breaks his relationship with the Creator and hides from Him. From then on, man has conflicts in all his relationships: with himself, with your neighbour and with nature.

Thus began “**the dark night of the soul without God**” as the mystic Saint John of the Cross rightly expressed it. The journey through life far from God, wandering and without light, becomes a very restless path. We are looking for a place, but we don't know which one, we want to get there, but we don't know how. A mysterious longing, the thirst of the psalmist, accompanies us unceasingly. It is **the longing for the Creator**. Far from God, in the distant province of the prodigal son, in our voluntary exile, the only alternative, like the son of the parable, is to *come to himself and return home* to the Father's house.

A Father who gives us confidence and an anchor that gives us hope

It is here that the Christian faith becomes the balm that reaches the *innermost* soul, where no other human resource can help. Faith supremely provides us with two *therapeutic resources* that calm deep anxiety: a Father who gives us confidence and an anchor, Jesus Christ, who gives us hope. Both resources are a source of peace, the perfect antidote to anxiety.

Existential anxiety requires, above all, **a firm hope**, a hope that is not utopia but «a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul» (Heb. 6:19 ESV). This anchor is found in **the person and work of Jesus Christ**. It is a «sure and steadfast» hope because it is not based on *subjective feelings* -“a religious experience”- but on *objective facts*. The Gospel is above all the testimony of a historical fact: Christ died for our sins and rose with power overcoming death (Acts 4:33). It is no coincidence that the apostle Paul always refers to the basic aspects of faith with the verb “*we know*”; he does not say *we imagine, intuit or feel*.

This hope dispels insecurity and uncertainty, the core of anxiety and takes us out of the narrow gorge, out of the «pit of despair» (Ps. 40:2 NLT). This leads us to a deep peace, the peace that allows us to say like the psalmist in the midst of great danger: «In peace I will both lie down and sleep, for You, Lord, alone make me dwell in safety and confident trust» (Ps. 4:8 AMPC).

Dwell in confident trust. There we have the second great resource that alleviates our anxiety is **trust in a personal God**. It is the God who takes pleasure in calling himself **Father** and calling us children. It is the God of whom Jesus himself affirmed:

«Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?» (Matthew 6:25-26 ESV).

Let us note, in conclusion, that both resources, trust and hope, must be cultivated, renewed. Like physical thirst, thirst for God requires regular drinking. This is achieved through a personal and continued relationship with God through **prayer**. Prayer, a great privilege, is a “face to face with God” (*coram Deo*). Its therapeutic effect is incomparable because it restores personal contact with the Creator, it returns us to the original lost relationship. Thus, **prayer allows us to rebuild the foundations of our existence** and returns human life to its true purpose: to enjoy the relationship with God.

Prayer, moreover, is therapeutic because it is **a source of peace**, it has an insurmountable *anxiolytic* value (as the rich text of Philippians 4:4-8 teaches us). Unlike the eastern forms of meditation, the Christian's *meditative prayer* does not seek to *empty and disconnect*, but to *fill and connect* with God and with His Word, it does not put the mind in “neutral”, but «fixes our eyes on Jesus» (Heb. 12:2 NIV). This meditation is the supreme source of peace because, as the prophet Isaiah says, «you keep him in **perfect peace** whose mind is stayed on you (God)» (Isa. 26:3 ESV).

Yes, the Gospel provides the supreme antidote to anxiety because only Christ, the image of the invisible God, can fill that “God-shaped void”. And in doing so he also gives us His peace as He promised His disciples: «**Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you**» (John 14:27 ESV).

When the pillars of the earth and of life tremble, the Christian remembers that «I, God, hold its pillars firm» (Ps. 75:3 NIV). For this reason, like the psalmist we confidently say:

«When I am afraid, I put my trust in you» (Psalm 56:3 ESV).

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The web **Christian Thought** gives information about the literary work of Dr. Pablo Martínez and his father Rev. José M. Martínez. Through this work the Christian thought of the authors flows covering a wide range of subjects; theological, psychological and ethical issues are considered from a biblical perspective with a relevant and practical application to current problems.

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