

EMBRACING VULNERABILITY, HEALING WOUNDS

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Premise

Vulnerability¹ is the key word that allows us to recognize the human experience of frailty as a place of salvation in the light of the event of Jesus Christ, through which God's love heals, elevates and brings to completion the whole of creation, which is not perfect at the beginning, but waiting for fullness. In the horizon of Christian thought, sometimes, the fragility of creatures has been confused with the consequences of the sin of the origins. In truth, this vulnerable and wounded humanity is not the defeat of God, the failure of his plan. Fragility precedes the original disobedience, it is the condition of possibility, because it is structurally inscribed in created freedom. So, the question becomes theological: if vulnerability is not only a consequence of sin, but even before that the figure of freedom, how can we understand its meaning in the perspective of the Christian faith?

The term "vulnerable" is a translation of the Latin adjective *vulnerabilis*, derived from the verb *vulnerare*, an action that causes a *vulnus*, a wound. Vulnerable is anyone who can be hurt in different ways: physically, materially, psychologically, morally, socially, etc. It seems that all aspects of existence are marked by the condition of vulnerability, since creatures (humans, animals, plants) are sensitive and fragile, as living beings subjected to transformations, aging and ultimately destined to death. It also seems that at the origin of living beings there is only one immortal and eternal Being – God – invulnerable by definition, but who, not being jealous of His own divine condition, has made His own the integral depth of the human, "even to death and death on a cross". (Eph 2:8).

The *quaestio de vulnerabilitate* therefore poses many interrogations to Christian reflection and praxis. Among these we collect two, for the necessary brevity of our intervention. The *first* is taken from experience: we ask ourselves how to inhabit vulnerability, in a generative way, healing wounds; the *second* attempts a re-reading in a theological key, asking ourselves if God is also vulnerable.

¹ Riprendiamo i contenuti principali da: L. CAPANTINI – M. GRONCHI, *La vulnerabilità*, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo (MI) 2018; lavoro nato dal Progetto di Casa Ilaria (www.casailaria.it).

Inhabiting vulnerability

Starting from experience, we listen to those who daily are confronted with one of the most dramatic wounds that affect human existence: the serious disability of those entrusted to us and we love. First of all, it is a matter of considering that what has happened at the evolutionary level is repeated incessantly in our lives: encountering vulnerability means coming to terms with the loss of sovereignty over oneself and over existence, with the possibility of annihilation and extinction – concrete or figurative – to which we do not resign ourselves. In order not to succumb, we need a generative reorganization, an original response of development that, as for the species, passes through intersubjectivity, attachment, the construction of affective bonds and shared experiences. That through empathy, language and reason we are able to build narratives and frames of meaning, new and future-oriented representations of oneself and reality.

There are forms of vulnerability that particularly challenge our ability to respond, because they seem to affect the heart of our own humanity. These are wounds of an additional level, the threat of threats, precisely because they damage the functioning of those fundamental mechanisms necessary for the construction of relationality and meaning. Think of those extreme psychopathological conditions that make the relationship almost inaccessible, because they affect precisely the activation of the usual modes of attachment and care, hinder the construction of intersubjectivity, empathy, communication, cognition and consciousness, and all the functions that we have seen developed by the human species to ensure survival. Dealing with this type of extreme vulnerability is one of the most dramatic experiences of the human condition. It triggers complex, singular, difficulty-ridden paths, in which many resources and variables not only personal come into play, the positive outcome of which is not always assured.

At this point, the only thing to do would be to listen to the story of those who lived with a family member with such wounds, as narrated by a parent or relative. We should pay particular attention to the intimate and peculiar expressions of these stories, to their words, to discover how, in the original itineraries with which each one has painfully confronted the deficits and the profound impairments of the relationship with his child, the same evolutionary strategies that we have seen develop from phylogeny are reflected, so to speak phenomenologically. And we will see how, as it has been for the human species, even at the existential level the response to the risk of annihilation can lead to an enhanced reaffirmation of life, which finds the essential resource for a rebirth in the framework of love. On this, I refer to our volume: L. CAPANTINI – M- GRONCHI, *La vulnerabilità*, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo (MI) 2018.

Entering another world

In these situations of laceration, of darkness and paralysis, of claustrophobic closure, imperceptibly, at times, a movement could start, a very slow of reorganization of oneself, of one's own form of existence. It is a path that can retrace the very stages of mourning – bewilderment, disbelief, denial, anger, pain, depression – because the wound to be dealt with is so deep as to deprive us of the very image of parenthood, of a child that we had more or less consciously nourished until that moment.

The acceptance of reality and the possibility of novelty opening up from it takes time. A very personal time and mysterious inner paths, often karst, similar to those of the seeds kept for indefinite length of time in the earth. Many different resources can help in this never-ending road, which widens and winds through new stations. There are many different factors that contribute to ensuring that people are able to live the difficult situations of life by responding in a positive way, while still taking advantage of the opportunity for development and future.

Some are personal characteristics such as the ability to cooperate and communicate with others, empathy, and the ability to creatively solve problems. The conviction of being able to influence events, self-knowledge and awareness, as well as a positive and optimistic vision of life and the ability to nourish goals and aspirations certainly help. But we also need favorable and supportive settings, especially in the living environments, such as family, school, work, community, where to live affectionate and supportive relationships, in which to experience a sense of participation and belonging, continuing to nourish a good confidence regarding the possibilities of one's own and others' personal development.

What we witness, in the stories of those who have lived it, is something analogous to a discovery: on the same reality, on the same handicap, on the child with disabilities and on oneself what changes is the gaze of the adult or the family member, which becomes transformative and allows a new way of addressing the other, oneself and the relationship. "I believe," mother said, "that we must first calibrate our expectations, and be able to see her life with new eyes. It's a matter of looking."²

This new understanding allows the other to exist and his way of being in the world to have value. No longer because it corresponds to an expectation, but because it is finally legitimized for who it is and how it is. In the folds of vulnerable existence, we discover fragments of something that has value in itself and for us, which lights up and sows light, also thanks to the care we take of it.

² G. MAZZARIOL, *Mio fratello insegue i dinosauri. Storia mia e di Giovanni che ha un cromosoma in più*, Einaudi, Milano, 2016, 160.

Finally, with effort and astonishment, we conquer that intersubjectivity that seemed unrealizable, and that now becomes accessible thanks to a change of pace and course, to a trajectory of integration that redirects, so it is no longer a question of striving for the person with disabilities to fully fit into our world, but it is our capacity for intuition that allows us to enter into his. We find ourselves involved in an extraordinary and unpredictable empathic process: that feeling of reciprocity that constituted the deepest gap in the relationship and that now allows, even sporadically, the meeting. Acceptance then is no longer desperate, painful or angry resignation, passive adaptation to the ineluctable, but openness to new horizons of life. A life that is expressed in its singularity and originality, finally welcomed.

New words

Along with the new vision are finally found words. Words to give meaning to what is given in our history and in everyday life, to talk to each other, to narrate, to cover and structure sensibly the intertwining of existences and to depict a future. There is a sort of second birth. The person with disabilities, his own child, is born to a new life, which flourishes in the special representation that one is able to imagine for him and for oneself. It is a process of re-creation: existence is regenerated in the frame of meaning that one manages to build for its way of being and for one's own, for the handicap and disability themselves, through an unprecedented reformulation, a recombination of the matter of life and of the words that evoke it in a metaphorical, imaginative way.

Wider horizons

The transformative and generative gaze moves from the wound to the possibility, from my pain to yours and to our existence that I can discover even close to happiness. The horizon widens. The relationship that is reborn and that grows between us needs to be shared and communicated, it opens new ways to reach others. Disability is no longer a private matter: it overcomes the claustrophobic limits of space and time in which it had restricted us. We return to walk on the road that seemed interrupted by the disease, by the label of the diagnosis. One rediscovers the possibility of coming out of oneself, from the defensive symbiosis, which wanted to exclude the whole world, to weave again vital relationships with others. Judgment is replaced by the search for bonds, the discovery of opportunities for sharing, of unexpected supports.

The sense of belonging restores integrity and wholeness, where the impairment and the commitment to compensate for it had exhausted, cannibalized the person. It is life that flows again with its strength and its

polarities, with its surprising inexhaustible novelty, in its amazing freedom, which incredibly crosses the limits of lack of skill.

Generative maps

To embrace vulnerability and heal wounds we need:

1- to abandon ourselves to a movement of openness and inclination, of extroversion and abasement, which helps us to get out of the illusion of self-referentiality and individualism, from trust in absolute sovereignty over ourselves and the reality that surrounds us, to recognize vulnerability as an essential and common dimension of the human. A substantial condition that incessantly directs to each one a request of acceptance and love, which necessarily opens to the relationship.

2- To make experience of variations of the gaze: a gaze that rests tangentially and gently on the other; which is prudently measured by proximity and by distance; that allows itself to be illuminated and shaded, moved to different planes and perspectives, to see new details and compositions, in which to finally be reborn and find new ones. A divergent gaze, which goes beyond the boundaries of the expected in a horizon of elliptical configurations with which to embrace one's own and others' existential peripheries that are deficient, dysfunctional and wounded, yet fully representative of the human condition.

3- To seek and choose new languages and depictions of an empathic, imaginative and metaphorical, intuitive and artistic type, expression of a mind, also limited and wounded, but at the same time integrated and intersubjective capable of alluding, suggesting, narrating the experience of vulnerability, without promising to exhaust it or define it, overcome it or solve it.

4- To re-open the time perspective: in the presence of a paralyzing wound, which seems to annul the past and deny the possibility of the future, to free the present moment, overcoming the fear of its immutability, to connect it to the memory of history, to its mysterious unfolding and developing towards the hope of a tomorrow still surprisingly visited by joy.

5- Rediscover and build new alliances and strong emotional bonds, to feel legitimately part of a large community of origin and destination³, which in concentric circles and in an ecological way extends from personal and daily relationships to the whole of humanity.

6- To assume personally and collectively a radical perspective of entrustment and care or to discover the need for the tireless work of love. A love for the other that goes beyond the dimension of sentimental spontaneity, to become the incessant work of the integral gift of self. A gift of self that, with the intelligence of the heart and through a daring, complex

³ Cfr. E. BORGNA, *La fragilità che è in noi*, Einaudi, Milano, 2014.

and inexhaustible dedication, does not tire of following paths that are often tortuous, sometimes point-like, always unfinished and imperfect, to create vital bonds and connections.

Ultimately, it is a question of assuming *an inverted pedagogy*, where the encounter with vulnerability, from difficulties to be faced and eliminated, proves to be an extraordinary opportunity for transformation, strengthening and development of humanity, so enclosed in this creaturely universe that tends to the transcendence of oneself and one's limits.

God's love is vulnerability

Vulnerability hides the very mystery of God, who in Jesus allowed himself to be wounded to the point of dying for love. Since the one who loves is vulnerable, inasmuch as he exposes himself to the possibility of not being repaid, this belongs above all to God, "because he loved us first" (1 Jn 4:19). In love with his creatures, he waits for a look that often does not correspond, to which he does not give up. In the passion and death of Jesus, the true power of God's love proved capable of accepting rejection and forgiving it. Therefore, as Pope Benedict said: "*Christ conquered death with the omnipotence of his love. Only love is omnipotent.*" Now, divine omnipotence is not un-breakability: precisely because he loves, God allows himself to be wounded, he is willing to suffer and therefore to use mercy, to grant the sinner an ever-new possibility of welcoming his love. In this sense and in even more explicit terms, Benedict XVI affirmed:

"God made himself vulnerable. In the crucified Christ we see that God is vulnerability, God's love is his caring for man, God's love means that our first concern must not be to hurt or destroy his love, not to do anything against his love for otherwise we also live against ourselves and against our freedom. And, in reality, this seeming liberty in emancipation from God immediately becomes a slavery of the many dictatorships of the time, that require guidance if they are to be deemed worthy of the time".⁴

Since vulnerability is the common space that Jesus dwells with us, he entrusted to the concreteness of love for the most fragile the ultimate criterion of judgment, surrendering himself to our freedom to be close to the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the prisoner (cf. Mt 25:31-46). In this surprising hiddenness and unveiling of Jesus the Lord, the space of happiness possible for all is opened: without care for the weakest there is no joy, there is no salvation.

⁴ BENEDETTO XVI, "*Lectio Divina*" during Ecclesial Convention of the Diocese of Rome, *Basilica of Saint John Lateran* (11 June 2012).

God's Last Work of Art: With the Waste of Humans

Through the grateful gaze towards the God of the vulnerable, the future of fullness, to which all creation is oriented, is revealed for the whole of humanity. At the end of time and of all things, illuminated by the light of Christ, the resurrection of all flesh, the new creation, the eternal future of God is announced. Therefore, the question arises from the need for faith and hope: what will remain of this world not ours, entrusted to us by the benevolence of the Lord, where history unfolds in its uncertain flow? What will God do with the tired and weary humanity that will present itself at the gate of heaven? Of those who have walked the arduous paths of faith, as of those who have remained far away or on the threshold, hesitant, uncertain, doubtful. Jesus' answer is clear and articulate: it concerns the works of mercy – which are even before justice – because "every time you have done these things to one of the least of these of mine, you have done it to me" (Mt 25:40). Therefore, the Lord and the most vulnerable brothers, for whom it is decided in the present, are those we will have before us on the day of final discernment.

As Pope Francis wrote: *«For in every one of our brothers and sisters, especially the least, the most vulnerable, the defenceless and those in need, God's very image is found. Indeed, with the scraps of this frail humanity, the Lord will shape his final work of art. For "what endures, what has value in life, what riches do not disappear? Surely these two: the Lord and our neighbour. These two riches do not disappear!»* (*Gaudete et exsultate* 61). Through a bold metaphor, we could think of an immense work of recycling waste material: bodies offended by poverty and exclusion, disfigured by illness and old age, marked by the wounds of life and returned to dust will be recognizable only to the loving eyes of God. He, who despises nothing of what he has created and saves everything (Cfr. Wis 11:24, 26), will also collect every hair of our head (cf. Lk 21:18) to make us new creatures, since *"everything that happens is preserved in him"* (FRANCESCO, *Angelus* 13 November 2016).

The last work of art, made with the material of humanity's carry-over, God has already begun: the model that the Church has before him already knows it, because on him the Holy Spirit continues to build it: *"This Jesus is the stone which, discarded by you, builders, has become a corner head"* (Acts 4:11). We therefore need to *start again from Jesus*. The question of who Jesus Christ was – and continues to be – belongs to the world, by its nature and by history. The fourth Gospel is clear in this regard: *"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son"* (Jn 3:16). God gave Jesus to the world; the Church is that part of it that welcomed and believed him, but he remains the living heritage of all. On this basis,

the prospect of sharing a gift makes sense, not the exclusive property of a founder to join.

It might seem trivial to return to the origin, almost as if the rediscovery of the source was a judgment on its loss. In reality, what is at stake is rather the call to the mystery of God who, in Jesus of Nazareth, instead of doubling down, can open a new light on the human: vulnerable, crucified, permanently waiting to rise to new life.

To conclude

Our Father,
may I welcome without holding back,
may I guard without possessing,
may I embrace without suffocating.

Lord Jesus,
let us teach without indoctrinating,
that we share without wasting,
that we cure without pretending to heal.

Holy Ghost
may I work without fuss,
may I collect without accumulating,
may I participate without protagonism.

Lord God,
teach us to pray without isolating ourselves,
open me when I close myself,
console us when we are desolate,
comfort me when I get discouraged,
cheer us up when we are together,
take me by the hand along the way,
hold us in your arms when we are tired,
teach me tenderness and patience,
give us your sweet rest.
Amen.