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Introduction

The Manifesto for a Theology from the Mediterranean offered an opportunity to give public expression to an appeal that we, as theologians, have felt with urgency: to develop a contextual theology, beginning from this "place". That text opened up unexpected paths of sharing, shaped by intuitions, convictions, and choices concerning future challenges. We consider it important that the Manifesto should now be accompanied by a methodological text, one that shows what characterises theological practice when it begins from the Mediterranean. A theology from the Mediterranean is not only for the Mediterranean; to speak of contextual theology does not mean advocating a form of theological particularism. The understanding of faith always arises within a particular context, yet, as it takes shape in relation to the concreteness of human life, it carries a meaning that goes beyond that context. We do not, of course, intend to conceive method in a single or uniform way. We are well aware that there may be different perspectives and experiences. We simply wish to highlight here certain criteria which, in dialogue among theological experiences from the different shores, we have recognised as important for a theology from the Mediterranean. As with the *Manifesto*, these initial *Notes* are offered as an open text, open to debate and to further clarification and development.

The following pages are the fruit of extensive work of dialogue and reflection, drawing on the contribution of experts, but above all serving as an occasion for fruitful exchange within the Mediterranean Theological Network (Rete Teologica Mediterranea, hereafter RTMed). After the summer of 2024, a research group on method was formed, meeting several times in seminar settings, culminating in the symposium held in Malta in the summer of 2025. What emerged from this shared work was gathered into a text that was revised and rewritten several times with the contribution of all, in an effort to hold together different sensibilities in a spirit of mutual openness. The text therefore bears no individual or collective authorship, but carries the imprint of the dialogues that have taken shape, the exchanges—at times lively— experienced over these months, and the trace of insights matured and visions shaped through discussion. It has taken shape in the "in-between", and this is its strength. The method of which we speak is thus the very one from which these pages have emerged.

Before entering more fully into the question that concerns us, it may be helpful to clarify briefly what we mean by "method".

The Greek word "*methodos*" originates in the context of Eastern mysticism. It has an Indo-European root, "*sad*" (to sit down), from which derives "*sādhana*", which: 1) in the neuter refers to the "means" by which a goal is reached; 2) in the feminine refers to a "spiritual discipline" practised in order to achieve harmony between the self and the Whole.

Fascinated by this Eastern understanding of the "way" (*Tao*), many philosophers have intuited that method is not simply a "means" external to life and truth, but an integral part of them. The *"meth-odos"* is not only a "path" that leads to truth; it can be effectively practised only by remaining "mystically" immersed in life and in truth.

Over the centuries, within Western thought, this interconnection between "way, truth and life" has weakened—at least in part—due to the more intellectualist emphasis adopted by certain strands of Christian theology. In the Latin world, Christian faith has always sought a deeper understanding of its contents (*fides quaerens intellectum*), yet it was above all the impulse arising from the birth of the universities, together with the influence of the rediscovery of Aristotelian epistemology (also mediated through Arabic thought), that led to the consolidation of a "scientific" way of doing theology, subjecting Sacred Scripture to rational investigation through an argumentative method.

This did not exclude different ways of doing theology, both within scholasticism itself —inasmuch as not all theologians accepted a "scientific" configuration of theological knowledge according to the Aristotelian paradigm —and outside it, as witnessed by the monastic tradition with its more "sapiential" character. What distinguishes these different "theologies" is the space granted to other demands or faculties (such as the practical and affective), alongside that of intelligibility.

It is nonetheless clear that both the scholastic form of theology and the rediscovery of the Greek-Hellenistic philosophical heritage during Humanism underpin the idea of "method" as a "path" that enables one to traverse a given field of knowledge in order to arrive at the desired goal: the truth about the object of knowledge.

This definition, however, reveals its limits when applied to fields in which relationships are at stake—relationships that deeply involve the human person.

I. The Mediterranean as a "Theological Locus"

1. Plurality, Contextuality, Complexity

With Pope Francis, we are convinced that "theological reflection is called to a turning point, to a change of paradigm, to a 'bold cultural revolution' (1) that commits it, first and foremost, to becoming a *fundamentally contextual theology* (2). A theology *from* the Mediterranean must be capable of reading, in all its depth, the experience to which this context refers. The method required for a theology from the Mediterranean must therefore be such as to foster "ways of thinking rooted in reality, a 'home' to human and not only technical data, poised to unite generations by linking memory and future, and promoting with originality the ecumenical journey of Christians and dialogue between believers of different religions" (3).

The Mediterranean (by definition: a sea "between" inhabited lands) calls for recognition as a "theological locus", precisely insofar as it is a space of the *in between*—a real space of encounter that points to God, to the encounter among human beings and with God, and from which we come to understand more deeply the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Mediterranean presents itself as a complex and multifaceted reality, in which a long history of fruitful intercultural and interreligious relations is intertwined with experiences of conflict and violence; a space of life marked by a particular density of meaning, as has also been emphasised by the recent Synod of Bishops (4). Within such a geographically limited context, there exists a rich plurality of religious presences: these include Christianity, as well as Judaism and Islam (without forgetting other, nonetheless significant, communities). The Mediterranean is also home to a rich ecosystem, one that is, however, heavily threatened by climate change and other forms of environmental degradation. It is with the experience of those who live within this reality that we, as theologians, feel called to engage—seeking to understand it deeply in what it has to say about the meaning of the human and its possible flourishing. In other words, this involves learning to read the "signs of the times", in accordance with the invitation of the Second Vatican Council, by attending to the specific Mediterranean context.

1 FRANCIS, *Encyclical Laudato si'*, 114.
2 Cf. ID., *Ad theologiam promovendam* (2023), 4.
3 ID., *Closing Session of the Rencontres Méditerranéennes,* "Palais du Pharo", Marseille, 23 September 2023.
4 "The exchange of gifts and search for the common good within large transnational and intercultural geographical areas such as the Amazon, the Congo River basin, and the Mediterranean Sea is emerging as an example of newness and hope" (Final Document of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops: For a Synodal Church—Communion, Participation, Mission, 26 October 2024, n. 120)

Contextuality and complexity, therefore, go hand in hand in the Mediterranean. If the term "context" evokes the pattern formed by the interweaving of warp and weft in a fabric, "complexity" (from the Latin *plectĕre,* to weave; *cum*, together) leads us deeper still, where the interconnections grow denser and everything appears irreducibly interconnected.

If, as we read in the Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis Gaudium*, the issue lies not so much in reality itself and the changes that characterise it, but rather in the lack of adequate categories for understanding it, then what is required is to find a method capable of navigating complexity—knowing that this also entails confronting instability and exposing oneself to the risk of the shipwreck of established frameworks. Such a shipwreck is indeed a loss, yet it can also make possible renewal and growth. After all, is not the beginning of life itself marked by the "breaking of the waters"?

To address complexity, the approach of modern science—necessary though it is—is not sufficient: the analytical and quantitative approach that enables us to define issues with precision. What is indispensable, in every field of knowledge, is a symphonic effort capable of offering a global, holistic, and qualitative understanding of the world. Indeed, "the fragmentation of knowledge and the isolation of bits of information can actually become a form of ignorance, unless they are integrated into a broader vision of reality"(5). This calls for a theological method that is receptive, capable of allowing itself to be touched and transformed through encounter; a path of hospitality that becomes thought-in-relation. A method that gathers and gives meaning, yet without enclosing; that leaves open spaces for the creativity of others—poetic in this sense (*poiesis* indicating making, creating, acting).

2. A Trans-formative Method

The method of a theology from the Mediterranean seeks to be trans formative, unfolding in the in-between—capable of disarming, within theological thinking, possible authoritarian or totalising tendencies associated with a single, dominant mode of thought. It therefore becomes necessary to recover the symbolic, slow, gentle and narrative dimension of thinking characteristic of the Mediterranean. It therefore becomes necessary to recover the symbolic, slow, gentle and narrative dimension of thinking characteristic of the Mediterranean.

5 *Laudato si', 138.*

Symbolic thinking proceeds through images, metaphors and analogies; it does not exhaust itself in denotation, but *points beyond itself, exceeding fixed meaning and opening up interpretative possibilities*. It is an *open, generative* and *non-linear* form of thought—one that resists monological closure and welcomes ambiguity, semantic resonance and a plurality of meanings. It is capable of *holding together* the rational and the sensible, the bodily and the spiritual, the real and the imagined.

It recognises the imagination as an essential cognitive faculty, capable of generating meaning, building bridges between different spheres of experience, and grasping deep connections where discursive analysis sees only fragments. Within this perspective, *metaphor* becomes a genuine epistemic device. As Paul Ricoeur argues, metaphor is not merely a rhetorical figure or an "ornament of discourse", as Aristotle taught, but an *instrument of knowledge*, capable of creating new visions of the world, filling the "semantic gaps" in our language and reshaping the field of what can be thought (6). It enables us to perceive *similarity* within difference, to connect what appears separate, and to generate *insight (7)* where abstract concepts reach their limit.

The Mediterranean lifeworld is made up of lived experiences that must first be narrated in order to be understood. Narrative *does not break reality down into data*; it reconfigures it into stories. *It does not isolate events*, but places them in relation; *it does not measure*, but interprets. Narrative is also *collective memory*: myth, history, genealogy. It is through storytelling that a community is formed, transmitted and transformed. It is within narrative that values, belonging and relationships take shape.

To think narratively is to *inhabit time*, to recognise the historicity of experience, and to situate the subject within a horizon of meaning that precedes and exceeds it. To narrate also means *becoming attentive to things* —and such attentiveness is the threshold of wonder, an epistemic and affective gesture at once: we become aware, we are struck with wonder, we tell others, and in doing so we begin to know, to transform, and to become ourselves. In this sense, it is a method at the service of a renewed and renewing humanism.

To begin from narrative thinking in theology means recognising the formative value of storytelling, reflective writing, autobiography, dramatisation and the construction of stories.

6 Cf. P. RICOEUR, *La métaphore vive,* Editions du Seuil, Paris 1975, 7.
7 Cf. B.J.F. LONERGAN*, Insight: A Study of Human Understanding,* Philosophical Library, New York 1970, 319 ss.
8 Cf. P. RICOEUR, *Temps et récit, Tome III. Le temps raconté,* Editions du Seuil, Paris 1985, 272.

It means recovering the *long timescales of meaning as opposed to the directionless speed of digital networks*, and restoring centrality to the formation of narrative identity as an ethical process (8).

Nor should it be forgotten that the "history of salvation" itself reaches us through biblical narrative—through stories first transmitted orally and then written down: the self-revelation of God is a dynamism that runs through human history until the recapitulation of all things in Christ. For this reason, a theology *from* the Mediterranean is a contextual theology that begins from experience, from lived realities, and from what they have to tell. It is a theology grounded *in* listening—and, in this sense, a theology of listening.

This does not mean privileging experience at the expense of its elaboration and conceptualisation; rather, it means recognising that there are never "bare facts", but always the interpretations we are able to give them, the meanings we attribute to them, and the narratives we construct. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that underlying every interpretation of lived experience—every attribution of meaning—there remain facts, events and contexts (often marked by conflict) which, in their complexity, cannot be understood through narrative alone. Theological reflection must therefore attend carefully to these as well, equipping itself with the tools necessary to analyse them, so as to grasp reality from different perspectives.

This is the methodology widely employed by Pope Francis in that text so rich in pathos, the encyclical *Laudato si'*, in its attentive listening to both the cry of the poor and the cry of the earth (9). In it, the various dimensions of the socio environmental crisis are first entrusted to the languages of the environmental and socio-economic sciences. Nor is this an extrinsic step in relation to theological reflection; on the contrary, it qualifies the integral gesture that theology represents within the encyclical. This style of reflection, moreover, characterises many contextual theologies (one might think, for instance, of Latin American liberation theology), and is often present also in theological ethics—not only in relation to applied ethics—and in practical theology.

The Mediterranean calls for a transdisciplinary reading, in line with the indication of *Veritatis Gaudium*. The evocative lightness of metaphor and symbol is thus interwoven with the clarity of languages more attentive to the quantitative and immediately factual dimension.

9 *Cf. Laudato si', 49.*

Within this breadth of vision, the experience of life preserved in the narrative of faith appears for what it truly is: a reality that is not only biological, but also —and above all—historical, symbolic, desiring and imaginative; a space of possibility for the future.

3. Allowing Time

To do theology from the Mediterranean means beginning from the listening to lived experience, in order to learn how to read it. Listening, however, requires time.

Narratives entrust words with the complex—and often wounded—weight of stories, and they patiently await concrete choices and gestures of merciful closeness and restorative justice. To think slowly means to inhabit time, to dwell within questions, to reflect without the anxiety of immediate solutions. It is a form of thought that cultivates suspension, critical reflection and contemplative attentiveness. All of this is essential if we are to distinguish it from the reactive cognition and superficial multitasking that dominate, especially in the digital world.

Slowness requires favourable environments, unhurried time, and dialogical and reflective modes of engagement; it is a necessary condition for depth, for critical thinking, for complex understanding, for intuition, for what has never been heard, and for prophecy.

Slowness interprets complexity because it is capable of welcoming the unforeseen narrative of change and of the unexpected. It offers an alternative to the constant and superficial narration dictated by the urgency of context. In the same way that the oxygenation of wine allows it to mature fully, giving it depth and body, so too slowness enables thought to ripen. It allows thought to emerge from the act of thinking itself, and makes it possible to grasp the complexity of the interweaving of different cultures, religions and faiths—of profound similarities alongside small yet distinctive identities. Slowness allows thought to come into the light.

Slowness is also an ally of ethics, because it draws thinking towards action, and ideas towards commitment, solidarity and closeness. It thus fosters bonds of proximity and justice. It is both the process and the fulfilment of fraternity. Slowness, like charity, is patient. By contrast, societies built on performance and speed tend to produce exhaustion, loneliness and a loss of meaning. The slowness of Mediterranean thought is, rather, an invitation to presence, to meaningful relationship, and to the care of experience. It is not nostalgia for the past, but an active proposal for a new model of civilisation.

The Mediterranean way of being is slow, but not inert or inefficient; it is attentive, capable of care and depth. In an age dominated by the logic of acceleration (10), where value is often attributed to speed, productivity and immediacy, slow thinking takes shape as a form of cultural and pedagogical resistance. It is a way of reclaiming the centrality of extended time and patient reflection. Slowness is a way of approaching history—and stories—with the discernment of the signs of the times.

II. The Living Criterion of Easter

In their complexity, Mediterranean lived experiences constitute a reality that must be listened to and read in depth, without haste. The interpretative criterion for a theological reading is given by the mystery of Easter and by its action as a leaven at the heart of every story.

To listen to the world by following the Risen One, and to give an account of it theologically, requires a transformation in a number of ways. This concerns the way we encounter reality, understand it, interpret it, speak about it and narrate it. It also concerns the very practice of theology: not a solitary exercise carried out at a desk, but a shared activity, a continuous dialogue with the world and among peers, across disciplines, personal histories and cultures. This calls for the forging of new criteria, a new style, and new paths of formation and research.

As "the Way, the Truth and the Life" (cf. Jn 14:6), the Risen One represents *the* method of *theo-logy*. Reality—assumed in the Incarnation and redeemed by Him—must be read according to an analogia relationis, which refers every created reality, through Him (cf. Col 1:16), to God the Father in the Spirit. The way of analogy follows the "sacramental" logic of Easter and helps us "to understand how historical and created reality is questioned by the revelation of the mystery of God's love. Of that God who in the history of Jesus manifests Himself - – every time and within every contradiction – to be greater in love and the ability to recover from evil" (11) .

The *movement of analogy*, which allows us to recognise in historical reality connections, signs and references to God, finds its vital heuristic criterion in the Risen Lord. At the same time, there is a need to rethink ontology in a Trinitarian key—one that understands reality not as the expression of a spherical and compact Parmenidean One, but as the Trinitarian One-in distinction.

10 Cf. H. ROSA, *Beschleunigung und Entfremdung: Entwurf einer kritischen Theorie spätmoderner Zeitlichkeit,* Suhrkamp, Berlin 2013, 93-143; 17-18.

11 FRANCIS, *Theology after Veritatis gaudium in the Context of the Mediterranean,* Naples, 21 June 2019.

Such an ontology is capable of accounting for the *in-between*: for the relationships that weave the fabric of reality and for the "between" of every encounter, beyond any false harmonisation or idealism.

Christ is the *in-between* at every level: He stands at the centre of every dialogue—not in a static position, but at the dynamic point where thresholds are crossed and hearts opened (cf. Mt 18:20). The mystery thus becomes narrative along the Way (cf. Lk 24:13–35). It opens up reality as vocation, as the *in-between* of the Incarnation and of Easter; it leads towards a *novum* that enables us to understand relationship as an "otherness" that is generated from encounter and within encounter—reciprocal hospitality and mutual recognition, a fruitful intermingling that allows the promise entrusted to us to emerge.

In the light of Christian revelation, the *in-between* paradoxically acquires ontological significance, since it restores us to the vital bond between Creator and creatures—a bond that redeems not only historical individuals, but also their relationships. This bond is not only geographical and synchronic, but also diachronic, insofar as it expresses the passage through time.

III. The "In-Between" as a Way of Understanding

It is in the *in-between*, then, that we find what is distinctive about a Mediterranean way of doing theology, because the *in-between* is the criterion that this sea itself offers us in its very way of being. A sea between lands, it both separates and unites, showing us how boundaries are necessary so that identities are not erased, and yet are made to be crossed—so that those very identities may be enlivened, in a movement of going and returning that admits no superiority or logic of domination, but rather that mutual exchange of gifts which is the principle of civilisation and the criterion of a possible fraternity.

As Lucien Febvre affirms (a source of inspiration for his student Fernand Braudel in his studies on the Mediterranean), a method attentive to the histories of a given territory requires a perspective that places itself "at the frontier between different disciplines", because it is there "that the great discoveries are made" (12).

12 «Les grandes découvertes se font aux frontières mêmes des sciences» (L. FEBVRE, Une Vue d'Ensemble. *Histoire et psychologie (1952),* in Combats pour l'histoire, Dunod Editeur, Malakoff 2021, 246 [originale: *Psychologie et histoire, in Encyclopédie française, Tome VIII: La vie mentale*, H. Wallon (ed.), Société de gestion de l'Encyclopédie française: Diff. Librairie Larousse, Paris 1938, 8.12-3].

Beyond being a geographical region, the Mediterranean is therefore a hermeneutical space. Its frontier character makes it a living space for a form of thought that does not close itself within systems, but opens itself to thresholds. Here, method is never rigidly fixed: it is an *incipit vita nova*—as María Zambrano writes—renewed each time thought accepts to open itself to the other/Other in order to find *claritas*, a gentle light that emerges between subjects who long for an authentic relationship. The act of thinking thus becomes passage, crossing, encounter: a geography of fruitful interruption and of listening to the other/Other.

The Mediterranean, as a paradigmatic horizon, also calls theology to a renewed way of thinking, one that is shaped by a different practice in relation to alterity and cultural and religious diversity. Such a way of thinking—and living—frees us both from the anxiety of losing identity and from the suffocating embrace of power in any of its forms. As a form of thought rooted in the margin, in pause and in incompleteness, the Mediterranean way of living carries within it the possibility of a renewed humanism.

As a space in-between, the Mediterranean is able to question relationship itself, and for this reason its epistemology is that of a wisdom of the boundary —one that encourages communication among differences. No form of life is closer than another to perfection; no cultural tradition can impose itself upon others. What is needed, then, is not to equate or to rank traditions, but *to translate traditions into one another*, to foster their coexistence not despite their differences, but precisely through them.

This means moving from a theology *of* dialogue to a theology *in* dialogue, marked by crossings. Dialogue is not a matter of bringing the other back to oneself or measuring everything from one's own standpoint; it is a matter of inhabiting distance by crossing it—just as the sea does—and of continually rediscovering, amid the tossing of the waves, the course of our own navigation.

Through intercultural and interreligious dialogue, it thus becomes possible to recognise the value of the other, and with it the action of God in the history of peoples. One of the most effective antidotes to rigid identities and to violence is precisely a theology capable of inhabiting the in-between and of fostering a culture of encounter. Such a theology contributes to the "demilitarisation" of the human heart and commits itself to the demanding path of dialogue required of communities, so that they may learn to practise and live a penitential memory capable of initiating processes of healing.

It also calls for the recognition of pluralism—not confessionalism—as the proper framework of shared space, as an education in diversity, and invites us to perceive theology as a theology for peace, a school in which one learns practices of reconciliation and justice.

A theology capable of inhabiting the *in-between* fosters reflection on the irreducibility of religious differences, contributing, in this way, to a better understanding of one's own faith. It also contributes to the recognition and promotion of the spiritual riches of different religious traditions at the service of the common good.

The *in-between* of the Mediterranean is, in particular, that between East and West—nowhere so deeply intertwined and yet so persistently in tension as in the countries and history of this "sea in between". This concerns not only the relationship between different religious traditions and cultures, but also the internal articulation within the Christian confession itself, with the contribution of the Eastern Churches. This is a richness present within the ecclesial and religious fabric of the Mediterranean—a richness to be received and rediscovered also in our way of doing theology. It is by remaining within the *in-between* that a theology from the Mediterranean can respond to Pope Francis' invitation to develop an *"original apologetics"* at the service of evangelisation (13), adopting the method of *see-judge-act*, proposed by the Second Vatican Council for reading the "signs of the times" (14) , and taken up again in *Evangelii Gaudium* 51, specifically articulated as: 1) recognising; 2) interpreting; 3) choosing.

1. Recognising and Being Recognised

When the word of God comes into contact with the history of individuals and of a people rooted in a particular geographical space, the "light" that radiates from it proceeds from the Holy Spirit. In *Claros del bosque*, María Zambrano defines method as a path that unfolds in the chiaroscuro of experience, where the light of the intellect does not dominate, but allows itself to be guided by a humble and profound light. Clarity, in fact, is not possession, but a revelation that takes place *within* relationship. It is a light that brings about a metanoia and is an integral part of the *meth-odos*.

Before it is a matter of "acting", method requires a transformation in the *way of seeing* reality: of God, of the world, of ourselves, and of others. It means, first of all, acquiring "a contemplative gaze, a gaze of faith which sees God dwelling in their homes, in their streets and squares.

13 FRANCIS, *Evangelii gaudium 132; Veritatis gaudium, 5; Theology after Veritatis gaudium in the Context of the Mediterranean*, Naples, 21 June 2019.

14 Cf. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, *Gaudium et spes* 4.11; JOHN XXIII, Enc. *Mater et magistra*, 217; Pacem in terris, 21-25; 45-46; 67; 75.

God's presence accompanies the sincere efforts of individuals and groups to find encouragement and meaning in their lives. He dwells among them, fostering solidarity, fraternity, and the desire for goodness, truth and justice. This presence must not be contrived but found, uncovered. God does not hide himself from those who seek him with a sincere heart, even though they do so tentatively, in a vague and haphazard manner" .

It is thanks to this "contemplative gaze", made possible by the light of the Paschal event present within human experience, that it becomes possible to 16 discern the "signs of the times", which appear as: 1) *signs of a Presence* that is hidden behind signs of newness, in aspirations for a more just and more human order, and in certain lived experiences—both personal and communal—attributed to the prompting of the Holy Spirit; 2) *voices* through which the times express themselves, and whose listening and discernment are far from irrelevant for a proper understanding of what God seeks to communicate; 3) *appeals* calling for the emergence, within faith, of seeds of prophecy—questions charged with a challenging force.

The Mediterranean, in its own density, teaches us that reality never presents itself to our gaze as shapeless or devoid of meaning. The first step required of a method capable of remaining within the truth—without presuming to produce it from itself—is to acknowledge what is given, and to acknowledge its density of meaning. The contexts in which we are immersed are contexts of life: webs of relationships that give meaning to places, to events, and to the way we engage with things and with time.

In the interplay between space and time, reality presents itself to our perception as already configured—shaped by meanings and relations of value. Our task, also as theologians, is first of all to recognise this texture in what it itself expresses. This applies to places, to the peoples of the Mediterranean and their cultures, to life stories, traditions and conflicts. A theology that is identical everywhere, clinging to answers formulated elsewhere rather than to the narratives and questions that arise from the places we inhabit, would not be faithful to the Gospel. What is required is to take seriously the lived reality of Mediterranean countries, recognising their wounds, the scars left by history, but also the expectations of reconciliation, the longing for hope, and the desire for fraternity and salvation.

15 *Evangelii Gaudium, 71.*
16 *Cf. Gaudium et spes, 46.*

It is within popular faith that the story of places—their history and the difficult passage through the present—is most deeply condensed. In the religious experience of ordinary people, faith is interwoven with concrete life, bearing its marks in moments of disorientation and in the search for consolation. Thus, popular religiosity in the Mediterranean cannot be reduced to a set of traditional or marginal devotions; rather, it is the expression of the faith of the people of God within a specific cultural *ethos*.

Popular piety in the Mediterranean permeates cultures in their everyday practices, runs through their history, and contributes to shaping places and to the development of a cultural and artistic heritage of inestimable value. Although it is not immune from elements that may distort its meaning, it cannot be reduced to folklore or to a purely sociological phenomenon: it is a wisdom of living in which the inner action of grace can be recognised, and whose theological value and evangelising force must be acknowledged.

Religious experience, as it unfolds within the history of peoples and at the heart of every human life, is the first *in-between* to be recognised and received by a theology that seeks to begin from "which already exists", as in *Evangelii Gaudium* 69. It is the first crossing to be safeguarded in the irreducible orientation towards God that characterises the human being. Evidence of this can be seen in the persistence of a sense of transcendence in the lived experience of ordinary people—even in non-institutional forms— and also in the significant presence of shared places of worship in contexts shaped by past or recent migration.

The Mediterranean knows the value of difference, also in the expressions of faith; moreover, "We would not do justice to the logic of the incarnation if we thought of Christianity as monocultural and monotonous" (17) . It knows the thirst for God that only the simple and the poor are able to live. For this reason, doing theology from the Mediterranean requires approaching popular faith— the religious experience of ordinary people, especially the poor of yesterday and today—with respect. Their search for God and their sense of God often mature and are lived at the margins of ordinary ecclesial structures.

2. Interpreting Narrated and Unspoken Experience

The "new gaze", illuminated by the Spirit of the Crucified and Risen One, gives rise—within individuals and communities—to an "epistemology of mercy",

17 *Evangelii Gaudium, 117.*

which makes it possible to interpret the events of the present history by discerning within them the nearness of God, who draws it eschatologically towards its fulfilment: *ta panta en pasin*—God all in all (1 Cor 15:28).

By virtue of the Incarnation of the Word of God—and even more through His Passover—the whole of creation has been brought to fruitfulness by the action of the Spirit of the Risen One, "the Lord and giver of life", who grows and unfolds within individuals (cf. Gal 2:20) and within creation as a whole, which "groans in labour pains until now" (Rom 8:22).The clarity of our analysis of the present context does not prevent us from believing that, in the "depths" from which the cry—sometimes muted—of the peoples of the Mediterranean rises, and from which we might be tempted to turn away, there has entered the One who calls all to rise with Him (cf. Rom 6:3–4, 8–11): "closing our eyes to our neighbour also blinds us to God." (18).

If we need a lens through which to discern the signs of the times, that lens is mercy—mercy as justice, at one and the same time. Mercy, therefore, as epistēmē, but also as responsibility. This means stepping out of asymmetrical positions in order to receive the truth of the other. A theology from the Mediterranean is called to place compassion and mercy at the centre—as a criterion of understanding, as a social resource and as a form of political charity. Only by beginning from crucified bodies—recognised and before whom we pause in order to care—can the truth of the resurrection be witnessed.

The decisive question for method, then, is not *"What is reality?"*, but *from where do we look, listen and interpret reality?*—and consequently, *how do we choose to act within it?* Alongside the question *"from where?"* there is also the question *"towards where?"*—the horizon towards which we move in the search for the truth of ourselves. It is from where we choose to dwell that the way we see reality and live it takes shape, for "these problems cannot be dealt with from a single perspective or from a single set of interests" (19).

In summary, to interpret the signs of the times, it is necessary to bring into interaction the living criterion of the Easter of Jesus and the movement of analogy, which helps the ratio fide illustrata to perceive the nexus that binds together in communion not only natural and supernatural revelation (20), but also the relationships among human beings and with God (21).

18 BENEDICT XVI, *Deus caritas est, 16.*
19 *Laudato si', 110.*
20 Cf. FIRST VATICAN COUNCIL, *Dei Filius, cap. IV: De fide et ratione.*
21 Cf. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, *Lumen gentium, 1.*

In this way, it becomes clearer how to discover "in the whole of creation the Trinitarian imprint that makes the cosmos in which we live a 'network of relations' in which 'it is proper to every living being to tend towards other things'" (22).

3. Choosing and Acting "in Networks"

Thinking from the Mediterranean means thinking with the other: moving beyond abstraction in order to become involved in the flesh of the world—in its conflicts, its poverty and its margins. It is here that method opens itself to action, including political action, understood as a way of caring for unity within disagreement and plurality.

To become aware of the other means developing an ethical attentiveness towards those before us, recognising the other in their irreducible alterity, in their vulnerability and in their dignity. It is a gesture of openness, not of control; of proximity, not of domination. This form of politics is deeply linked to the *gentleness of thought*—understood not as weakness, but as the strength of relationship, as the capacity to make space for the other within one's own horizon of meaning. Gentleness here becomes an ethics of relationship, implying a suspension of judgement, a readiness to listen, and respect for the incompleteness of human living.

In this sense, the idea of a "Mediterranean politics" comes close to the notion of care developed by Joan Tronto, which recognises political action as a daily responsibility towards the needs of others (23). To become aware of the other is to take responsibility for them—both in the concrete dimension of encounter and in the symbolic dimension of recognition. It is a politics grounded in *interdependence* rather than individualism, in *proximity* rather than in the abstract distance of procedures.

Emmanuel Levinas strongly emphasised this idea of relation as the foundation of ethics—and therefore of politics: the face of the other calls us, addresses us, obliges us (24). True responsibility arises not from law, but from the gaze of the other that interrupts our self-centredness.

Finally, this understanding of politics is rooted in a Mediterranean tradition that has always conceived the polis not merely as an administrative space, but as a place of shared life.

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22 Veritatis Gaudium, *Foreword, 4a.*
23 Cf. J.C. TRONTO, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care, Routledge,* New York-London 1993, 101-154.
24 Cf. E. LEVINAS, *Totalité et Infini. Essai sur l'extériorité (1961),* Le Livre de Poche, Paris 1992, 43.

As Franco Cassano suggests, the Mediterranean is a frontier space that compels us to think with the complexity of the other (25). In this sense, Mediterranean politics becomes an art of living together—of dialogue, of building relationships—rather than of imposing abstract solutions.

We are not unaware that the present reality of the Mediterranean, in these early decades of the third millennium, has once again become a theatre of pushbacks, of conflicts marked by inhuman practices, and of a renewed psychosis of a "clash of civilisations", often fuelled by religion, in which clear and large-scale economic interests and new power dynamics are at stake. Faced with such a scenario, it may seem naïve or unrealistic to continue speaking of a Mediterranean identity that expresses a relational humanity and represents a "theological locus". And yet, we feel all the more strongly the responsibility to "promote, defend and present a Mediterranean consciousness and identity", so that the globalisation of economic technocracy may be countered by a globalisation of relational humanism— capable of holding together unity and diversity.

With Edgar Morin, we are convinced that this requires a reform of thought through a reform of education, and a transnational alliance of intellectuals (26).

Thinking theologically from the Mediterranean necessarily means thinking together—in the sharing of intuitions and concerns, in the interweaving of perspectives shaped by different contexts. Doing theology from the Mediterranean calls for a transdisciplinary approach that holds together different disciplines within the horizon of the question of the human. It requires learning to work together and to imagine shared paths of formation.

For us, an integral part of this method is the very experience of the RTMed that we are building together: an experience of communion already taking shape in the shared work among the different shores. From this arises the need to develop theological formation programmes on a Mediterranean scale —programmes that enable students and teachers not only to exchange, but to immerse themselves in the cultural and ecclesial realities of different countries, so as to grow in a sense of Mediterranean citizenship and in a culture of peace and encounter. Such a way of doing theology has both a political and a prophetic significance: it becomes a seed of hope and peace.

25 Cf. F. CASSANO, *Il pensiero meridiano*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2005.

26 "C'est aujourd'hui aux intellectuels méditerranéens de prôner, défendre et illustrer la conscience et l'identité méditerranéennes. D'où la nécessité d'une union transnationale des intellectuels méditerranéens. En même temps, il est nécessaire de promouvoir une réforme de pensée via une réforme de l'éducation. Le mode de pensée disjonctif que nous avons reçu nous rend incapables de saisir l'unité dans la diversité comme la diversité dans l'unité" (E. MORIN, Penser la Méditerranée et méditerranéiser la pensée, in Confluences Méditerranée, 28 (hiver 1998-99) 44-45).

We conclude this text by emphasising that the method is still to be constructed—and to be constructed together—in order to welcome different sensibilities and the truth that guides our search. In these years, through dialogue among theologians, various metaphors have been proposed to express the experience that characterises Mediterranean thinking, also within theological research. The *rope*, in which no single strand runs the entire length, and whose strength lies in the intertwining of many strands. *Porosity*, necessary for life, since it is through passages and crossings that what is needed for flourishing reaches it. The *journey*, which speaks both of movement towards a goal and of setting out along the way, accepting risk and being willing to leave something behind in order to discover what newness awaits. The *Abrahamic tent*, with its pegs firmly planted, yet whose space expands in order to welcome every visitor. These metaphors, in their plurality, can accompany us in developing the intuitions and the experience that we entrust to debate and to further research: towards a method that enables theology to be done starting from the Mediterranean.