



“HE THREW HIMSELF ON THE GROUND” (Mk 14:35)

The positions of the body are four: standing up, sitting down, lying down, kneeling down. One stands up in order to walk. This is the attitude of one who is never still. Jesus is a man who is constantly walking, to the point of not having a house, or even a stone upon which he can lay his head. One sits down in order to read, to reflect, to study: Jesus as master sits down on the mountain or in the boat in order to teach the disciples and the crowds. One lies down to rest, even during the profound sleep of death: Jesus was

taken down from the cross and carried to the tomb. But to pray one needs to kneel down. “Throwing oneself with one’s face on the ground” is, in fact, the most common biblical expression denoting submission, abandonment, veneration, and therefore also prayer. Concretely it means to fall down on one’s knees, to open one’s arms and touch the ground with one’s face. We have many examples of this fundamental attitude of biblical prayer in a great number of ancient witnesses, especially during the time of the patriarchs, and therefore anterior to the Mosaic religion.

I will quote just some examples: Abraham threw himself on the ground in front of the angels who visited him (Gen 18:2). His nephew Lot does the same thing, “bowing to the ground” (Gen 19:1). The servant of Abraham, in a sign of gratitude for having found a spouse for the son of his master, “bowed to the ground before the Lord” (Gen 24:52); Jacob, upon approaching his brother Esau, “bowed to the ground” (Gen 33:3). Jacob refuses to humble himself to this point in front of a younger son (Gen 37:10), but in front of Joseph all his brothers must bow down (Gen 42:6). And so on and so forth: there is no doubt that this is the position of the body which one assumes in order to manifest full submission to the will of someone who is greater than him.

Now it is rather curious that this prostration with one’s face on the ground was abandoned in post-biblical Israel. Except for sporadic exceptions, the people of Israel, to this very day, pray standing up, and not kneeling down. It is Arabic Islam that has maintained this primordial attitude of prayer, and repeats it daily even in the present. In the Christian world we are normally called to kneel down, and the oriental Christians are accustomed to make continual “prostrations.” It is significant that Etty Hillesum, a young Jewish-Dutch who was killed in Auschwitz, and who is nowadays justly loved by many young people, confided in her Diary of having learnt once again to kneel down – an attitude that became habitual and congenial to her – helped by a Christian servant.

To kneel down or to fall down on one’s knees is what Saint Paul teaches in his prayer of adoration: “This, then, is what I pray, kneeling before the Father, from whom every fatherhood, in heaven or on earth, takes its name” (Eph 3:14-15). An alternative translation states: “From whom all paternity proceeds” and, according to me, this is more meaningful, because it indicates how from the submission to the paternity of God derives also an increased human fecundity. In any case, to kneel down is very close to “throwing oneself on the ground” according to the attitude of the ancient Semites, which the Muslims have preserved and which maybe we Christians must also rediscover, at least in the moments of trial, on the example of Jesus at Gethsemane.

Alberto Mello, Monk of Bose