

Widen your tent

“Widen the space of your tent – Effata – Rise up – Let us walk together”: These are the four Biblical references on which the Congregation of the Sacred Heart of Betharram reflected during the pre-Chapter phase; References which enlightened the work of the Chapter itself, and are now proposed to all the Religious as a way bill for the coming years and beyond.

The synodal way started by the Pope was lived on a diocesan level, then on a continental scale. Now, the delegates to the Synode of the Bishops are called to deepen and develop the theme: FOR A SYNODAL CHURCH: COMMUNION, PARTICIPATION, MISSION. The theme of the General Chapter, as for the Synode of the Bishops, is a program of life in itself, to see if we are what we must be, listening to the Spirit and credible witnesses of the Invisible.

1. A concrete experience.

In the 1980's, I experienced what a Bedouin tent really is. At that time, I was accompanying a group of pilgrims in the Wadi Rum desert, between the historic town of Petra and the modern town of Aqaba, on the Red Sea. According to the Bedouin culture, a foreigner crossing the territory which does not belong to him must stop to salute the chief of the local tribe (cheikh). The cheikh welcomed us with open arms. He made us enter his tent (his house) and invited us to make ourselves at home, sitting on matings and cushions. The tent was divided into two parts, one for the men and the other reserved for women. This time, the cheikh wanted to transgress the hospitality rules, by inviting us all in the same part. As there was not enough room for everybody, he ordered to widen the tent by moving the cloth which was used as a partition, thus creating enough room; No one had to stay outside in the sun (which means being rejected) or standing (which is done to win one's case when there is a dispute).

You can't imagine the joy of the cheikh, of the members of his family and of his

neighbours, all males without exception. It was a time of exchanges, of fresh water from the neighbouring spring, and of an excellent wild-mint tea. As the day was declining, we also spent the night there, lying on the matting side by side. This concrete experience made me wish to know more about “the tent”.

2. The “tent” in the Bedouin culture.

The tent, concretely, is the **house** where the family lives. It is a sign of wealth.

The tent must be **well built**, with cloths made of camel or goat hairs; it is called the “hair house” (bait shaar). It must be waterproof, and have strong ropes to create a wide, secure space, with tethering posts driven in firm soil in order to resist gales, avoiding sandy soils or moving sands nearby.

The tent is not a fixed housing. It is always a **flexible structure**, easy to dismantle when one must move elsewhere for the Spring and Autumn transhumances, and thus secure the subsistence of all the members of the family.

The tent is a **meeting place** for the neighbours and the members of the tribe, where one lives together some relaxed moments of eating and singing, some times of sharing information and projects.

The tent is a **secure, protected place** for the man who wanders without aim, for the helpless foreigner and also for the runaway tracked by the tribal or civil justice.

3. The “tent” in a context of faith.

In the pre-Biblical civilizations, the peoples believed in superior transcendental forces, a faith which has progressively forged religions and religious traditions. Man, thirsty for absolute, has always sought to give and find a meaning to his daily life. All the peoples have sought something which goes beyond and further ordinary life.

The world of the Bible inserted itself in this search by looking upwards while living according to the ways and customs of the times.

To have a tent and to live in it was normal for the peoples of the desert. In the Bible, the word “tent” occurs 300 times, while using the richness of the vocabulary of that time, the trace of which we find in the Biblical texts with particular shades of meaning:

- *Ohel*, from the word *Ahal*, which means “to be clear, glowing, to shine”. The tent must be visible in the distance by daylight because it is lit up by the sun, and by night because it is lit up by the brazier burning at the entrance. So it becomes a clear point of reference as a lodging or a refuge. “*I shall restore the tents of Jacob and take pity on his dwellings.*” (Jr 30, 18)
- *Miskan*, a **place to dwell, a tabernacle**. «*If you do not know this, O loveliest of women, follow the tracks of the flock, and take your kids to graze close by the shepherds’ tents.*» (Cant 1, 8).

- *Sukkah*, a **hut**, a cover. Ourias tells David: “*The ark, Israel and Judah are lodged in huts...*” (2 Sam 11,11). Or once more *Qubbah*, alcove, pavilion, a tent in the shape of a dome (Cf Nm 25,8).
- *Bayith*, a tent, a **house**. Rebecca takes the clothes of Ésaü “*which she had at home*” to cloth Jacob. (Gn 27,15) as for Jacob, “*he left for Souccoth Where he built a house for himself and made huts for his flock.*” (Gn 33,17)

Other Biblical references concern the confection of tent cloth, and sewing their extremities which is the **work of experts**, the place where to erect a tent in the shade of leafy trees (Ex 18,4; 1 Re 4,25) or near the rivers or wells (1 Sam 29,1 ; 30,21), the way to fix it strongly to the soil (Ex 26,32) and the pitching process with several persons participating (s 54,2; Jer 10,20) I stop here.

The Bible associates the image of the tent with the short time of life, with human frailness, with the safety God can give to his children or to the comfort he grants to the deportees.

“*My home has been pulled up and thrown away like a shepherd’s tent*”. (Is 38,12). “*We know it, indeed, even if our body, this tent which is our home on the earth, is destroyed, we have a building built by God, an eternal home in heaven which is not the work of men.*” (2 Cor 5,1). “*And while I am still here, below, it seems just to me to keep you awake by these recalls, since I know that soon I shall leave our earth, as our Lord Jesus Christ announced to me*” (2Pt 1,13-14). “*I will plant him like a bolt in a strong place: he will be a throne of glory for his father’s house*”.

The tent, which protects man against bad weather, in numerous peoples has become the symbol of heaven spreading on earth. “*He and no other has stretched out the heavens and trampled on the back of the Sea.*” (Jb 9,8)

“*And who can fathom how he spreads the clouds, or why crashes thunder from his tent*”, (Jb 36,29).

These peoples have felt the need to consecrate a sanctuary tent which served to the protection of idols and to the answers of oracles. “*There I shall come to meet you; from above the mercy-seat [...], I shall give you all my orders [...]*.” (Ex,25,22)

“*7Moses used to take the Tent and pitch it outside the camp, far away from the camp. He called it the Tent of Meeting. Anyone who wanted to consult Yahweh would go out to the Tent of Meeting, outside the camp. 8Whenever Moses went out to the Tent, the people would all stand up and every man would stand at the door of his tent and watch Moses until he went into the Tent. 9And whenever Moses went into the Tent, the pillar of cloud would come down and station itself at the entrance to the Tent, while Yahweh spoke with Moses. 10The people could all see the pillar of cloud stationed at the entrance to the Tent and the people would all stand up and bow low, each at the door of his tent. 11Yahweh would talk to Moses face to face, as a man talks to his friend, and afterwards he would come back to the camp, but the young man who was his servant, Joshua son of Nun, never left the inside of the Tent.*” (Es. 33, 7-11).

4. Widen your tent

Jerusalem, after being deprived of its children, and unable to beget new ones, finds cheerfulness and joy. The history of Sion, a sterile woman who gives birth, is foreshadowed by Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel, and Jerusalem will see daylight after a dark period of suffering.

“Widen the space of your tent, extend the curtains of your home, do not hold back! Lengthen your ropes, make your tent-pegs firm, for you will burst out to right and to left, your race will dispossess the nations and repopulate deserted towns, Do not fear...” (Is. 54, 2-4).

God himself is described in the Scriptures as the one who “has stretched the skies (...) has unfolded them like a tent” (Is 40,22). The epistle to the Hebrews attests that the custom of living in pavilions was the proof of the patriarchs’ faith.

“By faith he sojourned in the Promised Land as though it were not his, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. He looked forward to the well-founded city, designed and built by God” (Heb, 11,9-10).

This town is “*the Holy town, Jerusalem, going down from Heaven, from near God*” (Ap 21,10).

5. For a communautary or personal reflection

The Biblical file-card « Widen your tent » might help us to ponder on some points of our Rule of Life. I shall limit here to some references, knowing that you can find others.

What means...

- a) Living together in a legitimately constituted house (RL. 98). Is it a living place, or a dormitory, or a restaurant with an “*à la carte*” menu ?
- b) To offer one’s contribution to live an authentic fraternal life in community (RL. 97). Do I give the priority to the real, concrete community, or to the virtual community I have invented because I receive so many “raised thumbs” ?
- c) Living the spirituality of communion (RL. 96) Do I see God’s face reflected in the brother’s face with whom i have to live, discovering in him what is positive before rejecting him for this inevitable negative points ?
- d) Feeling responsible for the mission entrusted to the community (RL. 101). Do I know this common mission or do I prefer taking care of my secret garden ?
- e) Favouring spaces reserved to the community (RL. 105) .For me, is it important to frequent the chapel and the community room? Why?
- f) Being happy to live one’s vocation in a fraternal and apostolic community (RL. 139). Do I prefer a ghetto, a closed and sad community, or a welcoming community with open doors?



Societas S^{mi} Cordis Jesu
BETHARRAM

Casa Generalizia via Angelo Brunetti, 27 • 00186 Roma • www.betharram.net