

Attachment to God

A liberating and transforming bond

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We carry in our unconscious those experiences we have had since our birth. We carry the love, the voices and the caresses of parents, siblings and schoolmates, or, on the contrary, those moments where attention or affection were lacking. These too impact us as adults, including our spiritual life. To what extent is this irreversible or can one regain confidence, self-esteem and the ability to show true affection as an adult? Psychologist and psychotherapist Angela Albuquerque explores this question.

Attachment Theory

In thinking about human behavior and the dynamics of relationships, it was extremely important for me to deepen my understanding of attachment theory as first presented by John Bowlby (English psychologist and psychiatrist, 1907-1990) in the late 1950's, and which was further developed by the Canadian psychologist Mary Ainsworth (1913-1999). Attachment theory argues that human beings manifest innate predispositions to developing relationships of attachment to primary figures, usually mothers or another adult substitute. The purpose of these relationships, which begin already in the first year of life, is one of ensuring safety and security against outside threats.

The quality of affective bonds established by a child with an attachment figure also impacts the evolution of their affective-relational maturity. It is in this first relationship, in fact, that one can develop an image of oneself as worthy of love, a feeling of worthiness and value, a perception of not being alone and that others are available to help, offer closeness and provide affection when needed. In attachment bond dynamics, all this is said to impact those relationships that a person will establish with others, even into adulthood.

"It is within this interpersonal perspective that an individual structures his or her own vision of themselves, of others and of the world. There is a gradual process of replacement of earlier relational experiences with internalized mental representations. These internal frames of reference, or *Internal Operating Models*, will then orient a person in exploring new relational experiences"¹. These Internal Operating Models are used to relate to the external world, as if one were wearing glasses. Through these, a person constructs their emotional and social functioning and the ways in which he or she deals with various situations.

Bowlby rightly observes: "It is clear, however, that attachment behavior is not limited to children alone. Although generally elicited less readily, we can also see it in adolescents and adults, whenever they are under stress or distressed."²

The types of attachments that can develop are: secure, ambivalent insecure, avoidant insecure or disorganized attachments. In this regard: "Children who experienced quick responses to their needs see themselves as worthy of being loved and have a secure mental model. Instead those who received unpredictable responses (ambivalent attachment model), a refusal to satisfy their needs by caregivers (avoidant model) or were frightened or abused in the past (disorganized mental model), see themselves as unworthy of being loved, as unlovable and can have low levels of self-esteem.³

Is compensation possible as adults?

Faced with this perspective, one may ask: When one develops an insecure type of attachment, can it either be repaired or, that which was developmentally lacking as a child, be replaced? Can confidence and stability be regained in adulthood? Is it possible to compensate for this also relationally?

Science today speaks of the brain, with its neuroplasticity, as being adaptable to changes, capable of establishing new synapses and able to "modify interactive patterns from the past", while remaining healthy. According to an "integrative model", people tend to integrate the various bonds established in life. These bonds are not only with mothers, but also with fathers, grandparents, uncles, siblings, teachers, catechists and other adults who supported them. Fortunately, Gambini observed, "the constancy of the attachment model is not a fixed rule....It was noted early on that children who had experienced unsatisfactory relationships in childhood did not necessarily manifest the same behavioral problems later as adults. It is therefore important to understand what a person can do to make his or her mind more emotionally stable, more able to move from insecure attachment forms to secure ones, or further strengthen existing attachments if they are already secure"⁵.

Thus, when (new) ways of relating are experienced by a person in a deep and secure bond with another, these ways of relating can become more generalized and thus cooperate in reworking prior modes of attachment.

Attachment to God

With regard to possibilities for change through new ways of relating, I found the research by Granqvist and Kirkpatrick⁶ extremely enlightening. The researchers speak of how a relationship of attachment can also be established with God. They note that the four main criteria characterizing parent-child attachment bonds can also be similarly seen in our relationship with God. These four criteria are well summarized by author Giuseppe Crea and others as: "...[T]he search for continual closeness to God (Granqvist and Kirkpatrick, 2008); portrayal of God as a refuge for struggling believers in need of support (Kirkpatrick, 1992); attachment to God as ever-present, an "ideal secure base" (Kaufman, 1981); awareness that the relationship provokes anguish when one feels abandoned by God in times of need (Beck and McDonald, 2004)"⁷.

In other words, a profound experience of faith as the focus of a person's life can generate a bond of attachment with God, as Father-Love. In this way, a new internal and relational balance is fostered. There is the possibility that "faith in a God who is available, loving and sensitive can constitute a kind of compensatory affective relationship for those who lacked the opportunity to experience secure relationships with their own attachment figures"⁸.

God Among Us

Let us take this a step further. It was Jesus who revealed and indeed introduced us into a relationship with God as Father and Love. Through sharing in Jesus' life and relationship with the Father, he taught us to discover and call God as Father.

In sharing our human condition and giving his life for us, Jesus was the model of the Good Shepherd who establishes relationships of closeness, care, protection and secure foundations. Concretely, this can also be experienced in a community united in His name, in love (cf. *Mt* 18:20). Jesus becomes our travelling companion, a brother among brothers and sisters, just as the two disciples experienced at Emmaus: "Jesus himself drew near and walked with them. [...] As they approached the village to which they were going, he made as if to go on. But they insisted: 'Stay with us, for it is nearly evening and the day is almost over.' So Jesus went and stayed with them. [...]. And they said to each other, 'Were not our hearts burning [within us] while he spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?'" (*Lk* 24:15, 28-32).

A spirituality of communion can lead to this experience, a spirituality like that inspired by the charism of unity of the Focolare Movement, and centered on the words of Jesus: "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (*Mt* 18:20). Chiara Lubich writes: "I remember the early days of living this spirituality. Each of us felt with great clarity the difference between being united and being alone without the help of unity. When alone, detached from the community, one felt all of one's fragility, one felt lost, weak and with a wavering will. [...] In being united, on the other hand, we felt all the strength of Jesus among us. It was as if one was enveloped by the power and blessing of Heaven, and capable of the noblest deeds for God. The most ardent and difficult resolutions could be kept, whereas before, alone, no matter how much goodwill we had, it was difficult to continue with those promises made to the Lord. One experienced a strength that was not merely human."⁹

Is it possible to apply to the life of communion, to this life of 'two or more', the concept of attachment to God already confirmed by prior studies? Can a communitarian spirituality offer those conditions for establishing secure attachment bonds? There is ongoing study on this. A mysticism and asceticism centered on Jesus spiritually present among members of a community animated by mutual love (cf. *Jn* 15:12), has already shown itself capable of profoundly transforming people's lives on countless occasions.

¹ G. Crea, et al., *Attachment to God, attachment to parents and peers, and religious attitude in a group of Italian adolescents*, in 'Clinical Developmental Psychology'« 19 (2015) n. 3, pgs. 393-410. Quote J. Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss*, Vol. 1: *L'attaccamento alla madre*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 1999 (orig. english 1969).

² J. Bowlby, *A Secure Foundation. Clinical Applications of Attachment Theory*, Raffaello Cortina Ed., Milan 1988, pg. 3. Cf. id., *Attachment and Loss* Cit.

³ G. Attili, *Attachment and Bonds. The Construction of Security*, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo 2018, pg. 50.

- ⁴ P. Gambini, *Expressing Sex Beyond Genderality. A challenge for volunteer celibates and others*, São Paulo, Cinisello Balsamo 2022, pg. 110.
- ⁵ *Ibid*, pg. 126.
- ⁶ P. Granqvist - L.A. Kirkpatrick, *Attachment and religious representations and behavior*, in J. Cassidy - P. R. Shaver (edd.), *Handbook of attachment: Theory, research and clinical applications*, The Guilford Press, New York, pgs. 906 - 933 .
- ⁷ G. Crea et al., *Attachment to God*, cit., pg. 394.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, pg. 395.
- ⁹ C. Lubich, *All one*, Spiritual Writings/3, Città Nuova, Rome, pgs. 164 - 165.