



YEARNING TO RETURN

John the Baptist flees the city, taking on the status of an exile so as to become the unmistakable sign of a new exile that not even Jerusalem can remedy: an exile of the heart. *John is the prophet of exiles of all times*, people whose hearts are far away, yearning for someone to welcome them home and make it possible for them to dwell once again in their own surroundings, their own flesh, their own body. If we gaze into the eyes of John the Baptist, we can also glimpse our own exile—the exile of those who sleep next to a woman they no longer love, a man they no longer appreciate, a life story they no longer value. The exile of those who live in a family but don't really feel part of it; of those who live in a certain place but always want to be elsewhere...the exile of those who no longer find meaning in their work; of those who, looking in the mirror, do not recognize themselves.

John shares Isaiah's prophetic outlook, crying out with love that it is possible to return; it is possible to bring one's heart home, it is possible to rediscover one's identity as a human being. That is why John is a forerunner: he points to the possibility of a "return trip" into ourselves, typified by the great adventure of a God who "returns home" by incarnating himself in our human reality.

To be converted on a profound level means having the courage to bring back home the person we are—recognizing, loving and cherishing ourselves, and realizing with amazement that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. This is what happens when we try to make friends with ourselves, to appreciate who we are, and then discover that God has been there all along, contemplating us with love.

The heart returns from exile only if it is drawn by ardent love, only if it finds the strength to fall in love afresh. And John too has to learn this—by undergoing his own conversion.

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