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The "Spirituality of Vulnerability" in Louis Joseph Lebret

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Abstract

This article explores the key pillars of the spirituality in Fr. Lebret's work, which is far less well known than his ethical writings. To achieve this aim, the author's ethical, socio-economic, and spiritual works; some of his unpublished writings; and existing bibliographical references of his work were examined. This article develops a conceptual biography that shows the extent to which his entire intellectual work had its origins in the suffering and questions of the people with whom Fr. Lebret became involved along his journey. Fr. Lebret was never a theorist of theology but rather of the practice of faith. Both his ethical and spiritual concepts and syntheses can be fully understood only when illuminated in the light of the concrete reality of each moment that he sought to transform. Moreover, the originality of Lebret's spiritual thought lies less in his specific conceptual keys (divine mercy as a gift of vulnerability, the human person created in the image of God, solidarity as a political act of mercy, and resilient hope in the face of the difficulties of building the Kingdom of God) and more in the relationships between these and his essential ethical concepts, which are both the source and the goal of the believer's life. One contribution of this article is the elucidation of this relationship between ethics and spirituality, in which Fr. Lebret takes the *contemplata aliiis tradere* of his Dominican tradition a step further. Indeed, he regards it as a circular rather than a linear relationship, in which the ethical commitment to suffering reality is not the ultimate end of contemplation but a spiritual act that is a continuation of the Eucharist. In addition, the latter is not only the source but also the goal of God's mercy, which is verified as authentic only in acts of self-surrender and self-giving for the sake of one's brothers and sisters. Finally, he highlights something that has not been sufficiently emphasised in the literature to date, namely the power of his spirituality to illuminate the path in the face of our own contemporary vulnerabilities. Without undertaking a systematic study of the generative digital revolution, some authors have already noted that, while not denying its many positive consequences, it does not seem to foster contemplation; spiritual growth; or, consequently, critical awareness, purpose, and meaning in contemporary life. Fr. Lebret's spirituality, which is demonstrated by the repeated references to his spiritual works, not only shares the transformative intention of his entire body of work but also is considered by the author himself to be the very heart of that civilisation of solidarity that will make such a change possible. It is a spirituality which, through its four pillars, is intrinsically gratuitous, relational, committed to suffering, and intrinsically hopeful. Moreover, it is a spirituality of hope because it does not forget that it is in human vulnerability that the infinite power of God's mercy is manifested in a privileged manner.

Keywords: spirituality; vulnerability; ethics; effective mercy; integral development; gratuitousness; anthropology; image of God; integral human development

Academic Editors: Jos de Kock and Kenneth L. Waters

Received: 22 March 2026
Revised: 27 April 2026
Accepted: 29 April 2026
Published: 7 May 2026

1. Introduction

The work of the French Dominican Louis Joseph Lebret, rich in theoretical and practical achievements, holds its great secret in the profound spirituality that nourishes it. The central sections of this article are devoted to the key aspects of this spirituality, which is far less well known than his ethical thought. Perhaps the most surprising aspect of his proposal, in the face of the systemic causes of injustice confronting contemporary society, is that Fr. Lebret constructs, as an alternative, a spirituality of vulnerability open to all human beings. As is often the case in his work, the most original aspect is not found in the specific concepts he uses, but in the service of those who will put them into practice.

This spirituality acquires truth and credibility only as a force to place every human spirit on the front line in confronting the suffering and injustice of their fellow human beings. The enduring relevance of Fr. Lebret's spirituality arises from the ever-increasing fragmentation of the human soul and the common good. In an age of liquid culture, with all that this implies in terms of personal uncertainty, fear of failure, and the erosion of our shared sense of community, the key elements of the French Dominican's spirituality remind us that the spiritual dimension is a basic necessity for the integral development of the whole human person—of every human person.

2. The Life and Work of Louis Joseph Lebret

This section offers an initial introduction to the figure of Louis Joseph Lebret, outlining the biographical, intellectual, and emotional elements necessary to understand the significance of his work, particularly his spirituality. This vital historical framework will clarify both the significant evolution of his thought and the unity of purpose that runs through his entire life. In short, this section provides a context that will provide the essential hermeneutical keys to a deep understanding of both his popular ethical work and his lesser-known spiritual work, which is the subject of this article.

2.1. A Life in the Service of Mercy as a Political Act of Justice

Louis Joseph Lebret was born in Mihinic, a fishing village in Brittany, on 26 June 1897. Little is known of his childhood. He entered the Naval Academy in 1914 and completed his training two years later. He served in the First World War (1917–1918) as part of the Dunkirk fleet in the operations at Zeebrugge and Ostend. Although this first maritime vocation was cut short in 1923, it would leave a deep mark on him.

His two leading biographers, François Malley and Thomas Suavet, identify several traits of his personality linked to his Breton and maritime origins. The first is a vital practical orientation that demands that commitment remain rooted in fidelity to reality (Lebret 1942b, p. 6). The second is a compassionate spirituality open to the struggle against human suffering. The third is a deep-seated "*anti-intellectual* bias" that is linked to the authenticity he perceived among seafaring communities, which would underpin one of his main aspirations, namely, the development of a *science of action* (Lebret and Desroches 1944, p. 239). Finally, he himself acknowledges in an unpublished autobiographical diary how the seafaring tales he heard in his childhood fuelled his dreams of devoting his life to the service of building a better world (Malley 1968, p. 15).

Alongside this strong maritime vocation, his entry into the Dominican Order in 1923 marked the second major vocational focus of his life. Two major figures during these formative years should be noted: his novice master, Bernabé Augier, whom he acknowledges as his great spiritual inspiration in the opening note of what is perhaps one of his two most significant spiritual works (Lebret 1949a, p. 11), and Father Sertillanges, who in his eyes embodied the open and courageous preacher who, on the one hand, urged them to approach the truth without prejudice but, on the other, urged them to commit to it

whatever the price to be paid for defending it (Malley 1968, p. 22). One final detail reveals both his leadership skills and his ability to think big, qualities that would remain with him throughout his life. Even then Lebret proposed to his philosophy professor the creation of a journal entitled *L'Homme Nouveau*, intended to foster humanist dialogue between laypeople and Dominicans, as well as to build bridges among theology, the philosophy of science, and sociology (Pelletier 1996, pp. 36–37).

In 1929, after six years of rigorous study, Lebret fell seriously ill and was sent to convalesce at the convent in Saint-Malo, suffering, in his own words, from an *acute overdose of metaphysics*. His Thomist training and his passionate quest for truth are unmistakable hallmarks of his Dominican identity. Yet, it is in his spiritual work that this Dominican heritage truly becomes his own, giving it its distinctive character. Lebret's spiritual work would take the Dominican principle of *contemplata aliis tradere* (to share *what has been contemplated with others*) and transform it into a quest for truth which, in his practical wisdom, could only be expressed as a commitment to building the Kingdom of God and justice for all human beings.

Both vocations shaped the character, thought, and dreams of the young Lebret, who would henceforth begin his public life as a preacher, marked by three historical moments that will help us understand the hermeneutical keys to his work.

2.1.1. The Inspiring Enthusiasm of Saint-Malo

The economic crisis of 1929 symbolised a humanity on the brink of the abyss. The economic depression that followed had a doubly devastating effect on the Breton fishing industry: "between 1925 and 1929, the average income of a Breton fisherman fell from 8000 to 4000 francs. By 1935, it was estimated that the number of vessels in the region had fallen from 10,862 to 4866 during those years" (Lebret 1942c, p. 235).

Half the population emigrated, with all that this entailed for the country. Countless people were malnourished, and children were not attending school. Entire families were devastated by tuberculosis and alcoholism. In addition, sailors, after risking their lives on the Iceland or Newfoundland fishing trips, brought home only a few hundred francs. These examples represent an entire series of hardships that would touch the heart of the young Dominican who, from that moment on, would know that his Dominican life would have no meaning except as a voice for those who had none.

Over the course of ten years, he published six books and nineteen articles, all dedicated to exploring the causes, consequences, and possible solutions to the fishermen's profound suffering. The years between 1929 and 1938 saw successful trade union engagement that proved crucial in negotiations with the government over the Chappedelaine decree (1938), which was highly favourable to the workers. Even then, he argued that the struggle could only end with the achievement of a new humanism for the men and women of the sea (Lebret 1942a, p. 474; 1942c, 1958b). From this period, Lebret would inherit two of the main pillars of his spirituality: his epistemological understanding of mercy and his commitment to the struggle against suffering alongside the world's disadvantaged.

2.1.2. The Second World War: The Emergence of the Systemic Nature of His Analysis

However, Lebret quickly recognised that poverty and the unequal distribution of wealth were not exclusive to the fishing sector. Surprisingly, he began this systemic intellectual inquiry before the outbreak of the Second World War. Thus, as early as 1938, he was planning, together with René Moreux—the first president of the future association *Économie et Humanisme*—and Father Loew, to establish a Centre for Doctrinal Research capable of challenging the dominant ideologies by engaging in a struggle committed to

social transformation: 'To focus on Marxism was to analyse and judge the three dominant "mystics" which, together, sought to conquer the world' (Lebret 1957, p. 457).

The Second World War confirmed and deepened this intuition. On 24 September 1941, the *Économie et Humanisme* Association was officially founded. Its first manifesto, published in 1942, diagnosed a profound illness afflicting both the global economy and the human soul:

> The armed conflict that is shaking the world to its very foundations. . . is nothing more than an episode, an accident, in the long series of manifestations of a deep-seated illness afflicting the global economy and the human soul. War is nothing more than the sudden symptom of a chronic pathology. (Lebret 1942b, p. 3)

The manifesto had a major impact both because of the originality of its critique and the stature of its eight signatories: Lebret, Moreux, François Perroux, M.F. Moos, G. Thibon, J.M. Gatheron, A. Dubois, and J. Loew. Unfortunately, the group soon disbanded.

The project, however, was decidedly constructive in articulating an alternative economic system that would unite respect for the integral development of the person—including not only their freedom but also their transcendent dimension (absent in Marxism and Nazism)—with a commitment to the development of the common good and justice for all peoples (forgotten by Western hyper-consumerist individualism). A decade after the publication of Quadragesimo Anno—the encyclical that first formulated the concept of subsidiarity—*Économie et Humanisme* represented one of the most inspiring attempts of Catholic origin to embody the so-called *"third way"*. At that time, Lebret explicitly outlined the unacceptable nature of both forms of materialism: one, Marxism, of a metaphysical nature, for being explicitly atheistic (Lebret 1949b), and the other, of a practical nature, for being teleologically oriented towards consumerist material well-being as the primary goal of life (Lebret 1949d). Convinced that the time had come to give humanity the courage to adopt a new model, they devoted themselves wholeheartedly to the intellectual task of constructing it. Thus, this stage is marked by several principles that would prove of great importance for both his ethical and spiritual thought.

(A.) *Openness to transcendence as a primary human need*

In 1943, Lebret and Gatheron wrote *The Community Order*, a work in which they sought to articulate the social philosophy underpinning the proposed new system. Here, they proposed alternative positions on the legitimacy of private property, the requirements for international equilibrium, and the necessary reorientation of economic activity towards goods and the concept of need, even going so far as to draw up their own hierarchy of human needs. Three months after this work was published, Abraham Maslow developed his famous hierarchy of human needs, with no evidence of any influence among them. There is a fundamental difference in content that supports this assertion. For Maslow, material and safety needs should be satisfied prior to those of belonging, recognition, and self-actualisation, as if the body must first develop for the spirit to flourish. Lebret systematically rejected this dualistic anthropology (Puel and Lalanne 2016). Thus, he included openness to transcendence amongst the basic needs that should be guaranteed to every human being (Sepúlveda Del Rio 2024, p. 587). This concept reveals the importance he attributed, from the very beginning, to the care of the spirit as an essential component of the integral development of the human person. Paradoxically, following its initial success, both the concept of need and the hierarchical structure proposed in this work became key factors in his break with François Perroux. This rift, marked by significant theoretical differences, never erased their mutual appreciation, as evidenced by their correspondence, the constant references Lebret makes in his work to Perroux's thought, and the laudatory and heartfelt letter that Perroux published in the newspaper *La Croix* following Fr. Lebret's death.

(B.) *For the whole man, for all men*

From François Perroux, Fr. Lebret takes the famous phrase that would feature prominently in the *Encyclical Populorum Progressio*: "pour tout l'homme pour tous les hommes" (*for the whole person, for all people*). This principle would underpin his distinctive concept of development across the board, whilst also constituting the very condition for its possibility. Indeed, for Lebret, true development rests on two major pillars inherent in the very formulation of the principle. First, "*pour tout l'homme*" requires freedom and the defence of the dignity of the human person, enabling their self-realisation in all the potentialities bestowed upon them. Second, "*for all men*" demands that this possibility of personal fulfilment be equally open to all human beings. Thus, for Fr. Lebret, the concept of development must be integral and harmonious, two adjectives that point to this dual task of enabling both the transcendent and virtuous self-realisation of our own character and the justice of our relationships and institutions in the building of the common good. The first of these concepts is that of the person, which Lebret draws from Mounier's personalism; the second is that of the common good, which Lebret defines as the set of material, spiritual, moral and institutional values shared in solidarity by the members of a society, in such a way that each person is an effective and proportional beneficiary of them, thereby ensuring a full life (Lebret 1946, p. 10).

(C.) *A methodology for effective action*

Finally, *The Methodology of Economy and Humanism*, published in April 1944, is perhaps the finest document of the period produced by the association. It provides a methodology for transforming reality which, thanks to subsequent technological contributions (typological diagrams of parishes and groups, comparative diagrams, and punch cards), would enable the development of the Survey Method through which Lebret would put his concept of development into practice in many countries around the world. His methodology would enable "a commitment to poverty as a political act of mercy" (Lebret and Desroches 1944, p. 121), a conviction which demonstrates, from the very beginning, how Lebret's ethical commitment was rooted in his spiritual experience, of which it was both a consequence and a guarantee of authenticity. The co-author of this important text, Henri Desroches, would from that moment on become the second leading figure in Economy and Humanism. This, combined with the association's enormous growth in the years following the Second World War, which saw it establish itself in nearly 8000 parishes across France, made it necessary to decentralise the management team, with the opening of centres in Lyon and Paris.

However, in 1949, a crisis erupted. The immediate catalyst was the condemnation of the book published by Henri Desroches, *Signification du Marxisme*. Its aim was to facilitate an open dialogue between Marxism and Christianity, to revive the association's original intellectual project. However, the ill-timed publication on 26 July 1949, just three weeks after the Holy Office's renewed condemnation of Marxism, could only achieve the opposite of what had been intended. The social uproar helped to draw significant attention to the book but ultimately eroded the future of the association itself. On the one hand, Lebret himself reviewed four of the most significant critiques of the book: those written by Emmanuel Mounier, Fr. Chambre, Jean Lacroix, and Fr. Fessard (Lebret 1950b, pp. 16–24). On the other, Desroches' departure from the association undermined its internal cohesion and social influence, whilst casting doubt on the very role played by Fr. Lebret. Thomas Suavet went so far as to say that "circumstances have forced an excessive caution" (Malley 1945–1957).

However, this condemnation was not the sole cause of a crisis that had been brewing for some time. The initial founding enthusiasm had dissipated, as had the exuberant optimism of the period immediately following the end of the Second World War. By then, the journal *Économie et Humanisme* had split into three separate publications: *Idées et forces*,

which published eight issues, the last in September 1950, edited by H. Desroches and Th. Guilbaud; *Le diagnostic économique et social*, edited by R. Moreux and Lebret; and *Lettre de la Tourette*, which had begun in 1946 as a spiritual supplement to *Économie et Humanisme*, publishing its first issue as an independent journal on 26 January 1949 and adopting, in 1950, the title *Efficacité*, clearly oriented towards the spirituality of the committed believer. The editorial reunification under the title *Économie et Humanisme* did not occur until 1952, with the publication of issue 71, marking the magazine's eleventh year. Curiously, *Efficacité* was the only one that continued to be published independently until the end of 1955, which constitutes further proof of the importance that Lebret consistently attributed to spirituality as the source and goal of all authentic commitment.

This experience of rupture marked the beginning of a difficult two-year process that culminated in the reunification of both the association's management teams in Lyon and its main programmatic orientations. In 1951, the Governing Council drafted *Au contact des forces vivantes*, an important manifesto intended to update the association's mission.

Despite the intellectual revitalisation efforts of this period, including the association's successful work on *spatial planning* (the sessions organised in 1952, which brought together the Minister for Urban Planning, Claudius Petit, and the renowned economist Alfred Sauvy, among others, had a decisive influence on French policy regarding a central issue that combined key aspects of sustainability and distributive justice), the problems facing France and Europe seemed insufficient for the now global outlook of Father Lebret's mind. His own awareness of the historical limitations of the first phase of his thinking demanded a reorientation of his project. Thus, in 1952, he proposed transforming *Économie et Humanisme* into a Centre for Research and Training in Development Economics. His team rejected the proposal. It was the beginning of the end. Feeling betrayed by his closest collaborators, Lebret resigned as director of *Économie et Humanisme* in 1956 and was eventually replaced by Father Viau.

2.1.3. The Trip to Brazil: Development as a New Civilisation Based on Solidarity

Although Lebret's tenure at the helm of *Économie et Humanisme* did not formally come to an end until 1956, as noted above, there is a general consensus that his first trip to the so-called Third World—to São Paulo in 1947—marked the beginning of his second great conversion.

(A.) *A Copernican shift: There can be no integral development without a cultural revolution*

Once again, the direct encounter with the favelas, hunger, illiteracy, infant mortality, inhuman working conditions, and derisory wages constituted, in his eyes, further proof of undeserved misery and structural injustice. These experiences decisively shaped his historic conviction to build an alternative economic system centred on the human person.

During this trip, he taught the course *"Introduction to Human Economics"* at the School of Sociology and Politics in São Paulo, which allowed him not only to present his socio-economic ideas, but also to perceive both the deep yearning for change among Latin American youth and the resonance of his own project and leadership. Brazil also opened his mind to a new world, endowed with a set of values that offered an alternative to those of French and Western grandeur (Chamedes 2015) and that would inspire his final proposal for a civilisation of solidarity:

> "But the trip to Brazil would open Lebret's eyes to the existence of another reality: poverty experienced in a land rich in potential and inhabited by a people who had inherited neither the religious barriers of old Europe nor the violent racial prejudices of the United States, where segregation and the lynching of Black people continued to dominate the headlines. A tolerant and flexible population, open

to hope and the future. And, above all, a population that rejected xenophobia and any plan to dominate other peoples". (Bosi 2012, p. 258)

This was confirmed when, within a few months, he also visited both the United States and numerous South American countries, providing his reflections in writing in his *Lettre aux Américains* (Lebret 1947). Lebret thus brought about a Copernican shift in the scope and objectives of a project that would be global or not be at all. Thus, alongside the community framework of the human economy that he had designed from an essentially European perspective, Lebret would propose a conception of development that required nothing less than a cultural revolution. Thus, his proposal for a *"Civilisation of Solidarity"* would add to integral and harmonious development the challenge of incorporating a new educational, cultural, and value-based perspective that would enable them to interpret the world's challenges from entirely different analytical perspectives (Lebret 1956, p. 22).

(B.) *Professional and ecclesial relevance of his work*

The years between the founding of L'IRFED (an institution designed to implement this alternative on a global scale) and his death in July 1966 coincided with the period of his belated recognition. In the professional sphere, this recognition came about through his numerous contributions to the national development plans of many countries (Brazil, Senegal, Lebanon, Colombia, India, South Vietnam, Uruguay, and Chile). In the ecclesiastical sphere, the accession of Paul VI to the papacy on 21 June 1963 marked the true turning point in Lebret's subsequent influential ecclesiastical position. From day one, their relationship was remarkable. From that point on, he was twice appointed representative of the Holy See to the UN, both times at conferences related to development. He was also appointed as an expert to the Second Vatican Council, although with a delay that irritated the Pope himself, as his appointment did not occur until 5 March 1964. During that time, he contributed a total of eighteen studies to the conciliar documents, exerting influence on the drafting of Schema XIII of *Gaudium et Spes*.

Regarding his involvement in the first draft of *Populorum Progressio*, Lebret writes in his unpublished diary about the text the Pope had commissioned him to draft for an encyclical on development: "He does not yet know whether he will finalise the document I have prepared on development. . . the encyclical on development is ready in Latin, slightly abridged at the end" (François Malley, *L.J. Lebret et le concile Vatican II*, unpublished). This text would undergo a further seven revisions before its promulgation on 26 March 1967. Despite these modifications, both its general structure and many of its fundamental ideas bear the unmistakable mark of the French Dominican.

2.2. The Significance of His Spiritual Work

It may come as a surprise that the aim of this article is to highlight the relevance and power of Fr. Lebret's spirituality for our times. However, those who think this way are not entirely mistaken, for his spiritual work has two characteristics that make it difficult to understand today. The first is his language, which even then seemed to belong to another era, something that Paul VI himself noted: "one cannot write like that nowadays" (Cosmao 1988, p. 3). The second is that, at first glance, the enumeration of the key points of his spiritual thought makes it difficult to pinpoint where the originality of his contributions lies. This latter factor may help explain why his spirituality has received relatively little scholarly attention compared to the recognition of his ethical and socio-economic thought. Yet a thorough study of his biography refutes this supposed irrelevance of his spirituality.

(A.) First, because alongside the commercial observation that his seven spiritual books generated more sales than the rest of his entire body of work (Puel and Lalanne 2016),

there is another of a historical nature that bears witness to the spiritual impact he had on a significant proportion of the American youth of his time:

> "The text by Whitaker, secretary of the Justice and Peace Commission of the Brazilian Catholic Church, shows that Lebret's spiritual and socio-religious influence on Catholic university students and certain prominent figures, such as the writer Alceu Amoroso Lima or Bishop D. Helder Câmara, has been far more significant than that of the socio-economic studies carried out by the Centre for Studies with the unpronounceable name created in Brazil in 1947 by Lebret: *the Société d'Analyses Graphiques et Mécanographiques Appliquées aux Complexes Sociaux* (SAGMACS)." (Houée 1997, p. 2)

(B.) Second, Fr. Lebret was never a bookish theorist, but a man of action. Let us recall his anti-intellectual bias (p. 2), which he linked to the authenticity he perceived among ordinary people and to his desire to develop a science of action. Both in the field of theology and spirituality, he remained consistent with this initial vocation of placing intellectual work at the service of the simplest members of society. Fr. Lebret was never a theorist of theology, but rather of the practice of faith (Cosmao 1986, p. 79)—a foundational insight that positions him as a precursor of Liberation Theology (along with a few others, as we shall see), although it cannot be said that he himself brought this theoretical reflection to a successful conclusion. One of the founders of the latter, Gustavo Gutiérrez, recognises him as a precursor, but not as one of its principal theoretical references.

The same is true in the spiritual realm. Lebret never set out to write an innovative spiritual theory, but rather to help believers ground their commitment to reality in the spiritual life, in the life of God. Thus, the seven books that constitute his spiritual works are *Principles for Action* (1945); *Action and the Path to God* (1949); *Human Ascent* (1951); *Renewing the Examination of Conscience* (written with Thomas Suavet, 1952); *Called to the Lord* (1955); *Dimensions of Charity* (1958); and *In the Battle of the World* (written with Thomas Suavet; Lebret and Suavet 1962). It is clear who his intended audience is—grassroots Christian activists from all corners of the world. In addition, his ultimate aim is also clear: to help people live from the perspective of God's love so that they may love their brothers and sisters effectively.

The focus of each individual book addresses a specific spiritual issue faced by people of faith, questions he received from the committed believers whom he encountered in daily life and to which he sought to respond. However, the overall vision of the seven books takes the relationship between ethics and mysticism, between commitment and spiritual life, beyond what had previously been imagined. It is this relational synthesis of ethical and spiritual sources of meaning, and above all the awareness of building upon them a new civilisation of solidarity, that makes Lebret's spirituality, in my view, a reference point worthy of study in schools of theology and spirituality. This constitutes alternative dialectical synthesis, which finds in God's mercy and in the struggle against all human suffering the poles that give profound meaning to the pursuit of the Kingdom of God.

(C.) Third, he writes from the knowledge of his own vulnerability, of his own experience. From this simplicity, Lebret's spirituality becomes a profound source of hope for all those who seek it. It is for this reason that his spirituality proved to be a breath of fresh air for so many people. They recognized him as one of their own because he knew how to transform his own loneliness and suffering into God's loving strength in the service of others.

Indeed, between 1947—the year of his trip to Brazil—and the founding of L'IRFED in 1958, Fr. Lebret lived through his darkest years, marked by profound loneliness and

personal suffering: the erosion of his own credibility and that of the association following the crisis at *Économie et Humanisme* (in 1949); the experience of institutional abandonment by his own Order, from which, despite his repeated pleas to the three provincials of the time, he received only silence in response (an abandonment all the more painful given that three years earlier, at the height of the association's crisis, Fr. Lebret had received almost unanimous support from the French ecclesiastical hierarchy; of 38 bishops, there were only two explicit rejections, and he received a sum of 120,600 FRF in aid at the time) (Pelletier 2017, p. 168); and, finally, and perhaps most painfully, the abandonment by his closest collaborators, who definitively rejected his proposal to reorient the purpose and mission of *Économie et Humanisme* towards integral and harmonious development. As a results, Fr. Lebret was forced to leave the association he himself had founded in 1956 and to struggle alone until 1958 to see the project realised at an institutional level, under a different acronym (IRFED) and without the company of those he had loved so deeply.

During these ten years of solitude and a sense of personal failure, we encounter for the first time a Fr. Lebret who occasionally comes to doubt himself: "All are great projects that have come to nothing... Nothing is working... Nothing can work... Everything is uncertain... Everything is blocked. Everything is failure..." (Lebret 1950a, p. 66).

Lebret therefore writes his spiritual books with the clear aim of reaching out to ordinary people who are suffering, conscious that he is one of them, but to tell them not to lose hope because it is in human poverty that God's merciful power can be fully manifested. He does this in the first person, demonstrating that he knows what he is talking about, because he writes every line not from the lofty position of one who knows and wishes to show it off, but from the simplicity of one who has developed it from an awareness of his own limitations, of his own vulnerability. Spirituality is not a privilege reserved for a select few, but the space where human vulnerability and simplicity are transformed into God's strength and mercy.

3. Keys to a Spirituality of Vulnerability

Lebret's spirituality is rooted in a Dominican spiritual tradition in which God's grace and mercy constitute the source and origin of all things, including moral commitment. St Thomas himself, before beginning Part II-II of his *Summa Theologica*, concludes Part I-II with the treatise on grace dedicated to the New Law: The Law of the Love of God made flesh. Some scholastic commentators have highlighted Aquinas's connection with an evangelical morality of joy, as opposed to a morality of obligation (Vidal 1979; Pinckaers 2005). They are not without justification, for ethical commitment is here authentically the fruit of divine love and, consequently, can only be conveyed from a spirit of hope. However, hope never denies reality, for the mystery of the Incarnation lies at its core. On the contrary, it recognises reality in depth, transforming the form in which we perceive it into. At times, this spirituality of grace has been presented through an incorporeal joy that rendered ineffective the work of purification and personal growth which it also demands.

The so-called Rhineland mysticism, represented by the central figure of Meister Eckhart, delves deeper into this immersion of the human being in the divine dynamic of Creation and Return, affirming that the gift of grace requires humility and an awareness of one's own poverty. The proud and the arrogant will never recognise the need for it: "To receive grace as a gift from the divine Person himself and allow it to act upon the believer's soul, the believer must be in a state of poverty, dispossession and abandonment" (Boncour 2024, p. 332).

Father Lebret takes this perspective a step further, for awareness of one's own poverty is not merely the necessary condition for receiving God's merciful grace. In the misery of others, he also finds the key to an authentic spirituality:

> Misery exists. Recognition of this fact determines the vocation of a member of *Économie et* Humanisme' (Lebret and Desroches 1944, p. 122). A recognition that commits one to "carrying the misery of the people in one's own heart and upon one's own shoulders; not as a stranger, but as one among others, with others. (Lebret 1945, p. 11)

Lebret never reduced poverty, nor human development, to mere economic aspects. A society such as ours has multiplied fragmentation and helplessness in countless ways that go far beyond the economic causes of the suffering of the poor. Thus, Fr. Lebret's message serves today to rekindle those spirits shattered by stress, loneliness, anxiety, the loss of identity or self-esteem, the fear of being left out (FOMO) of the system, or the lack of meaning in a way of life that many would abandon if they could. Nevertheless, as was the case in Brittany, the poor remain the primary recipients of his spirituality.

Lebret concluded his message to the young people of Uruguay, as he did so many times when speaking to young people, by reminding them that the more or less effective commitment of our actions could not be the end: "Everything must return to God through your actions and your offerings" (Suavet 1968, p. 142). Ethics and mysticism feed into one another; they are mutually dependent. Lebret always urged them never to cease deepening their spiritual relationship with God, for it is in the spirit that the strength and meaning capable of transforming a person's attitude and purpose, and the values of a wounded and fractured civilisation, lie. The seed of a civilisation of solidarity is embedded in Fr. Lebret's spirituality. He is aware that without that inner strength, no civilisational transformation can succeed. Lebret bases his spirituality on four fundamental themes:

A. Divine mercy as a gift of vulnerability;
B. The human person created in the image of God;
C. Solidarity as a political act of mercy;
D. Resilient hope in the face of the difficulties of building the Kingdom of God.

These four spiritual pillars constitute a prophetic wake-up call to awaken and nurture the human spirit. Above all, they are a cry of hope, a call to love with clarity, to never cease believing. Faced with this, 75 years later, one cannot help but wonder whether reading his spiritual work, which urges us to shake off our indifference and resignation, is not particularly relevant in our own day. Indeed, some scholars of the emerging algorithmic and generative civilisation have noted that, despite its undeniable positive capabilities, it may hinder contemplative capacity (Carr 2011), awareness of our own identity (Zuboff 2020; López Mondéjar 2024), and the creation of profound meaning. This is due in part to a form of digital hypercommunication that extinguishes silence and, with it, spiritual depth (Han 2025). In short, the unsustainable pace of a liquid society governed by the logic of disposability (Bauman 2016) calls for a renewed beginning through spiritual education capable of restoring a perspective that recognises the human being as a mystery worthy of love (Yúfera 2015).

3.1. God as a Merciful Source: Truth as Vulnerability

Father Lebret's spirituality is, above all, a spirituality of gratuitousness. It is a spirituality of grace and, therefore, of the gift—of the unconditional divine gift, in keeping with his infinite mercy—which precludes any interpretation of this gratuitousness in terms of instrumental logic, duty, the pursuit of benefit, or reciprocity.

The fact that this great gift is freely given awakens in us a deep and natural sense of gratitude, opening us with empathy to God himself and to our fellow human beings. This divine gift, which can only be experienced as joy, calls us to love and to be loved, to live from that love which impels us, on the one hand, to seek that divine and loving Truth, the source of all things, and, on the other, to give freely what we have freely received.

Lebret also inherits from the Dominican tradition this mysticism of Truth: "Veritas" is the motto of the Order of Preachers, which places true knowledge of God in the experience of divine Charity as a transforming source of love, at the service of a dual quest for personal and communal authenticity. In this consistent ethical endeavour, the order of factors is very important. It is not because I am ethically perfect that God loves me; rather, it is because God loves me that I want to be a better person and to commit myself to a more just society.

(A.) *The search for truth as personal vulnerability*

On a personal level, the truth of who we are has to do with the very process of purifying our way of being—that is, our way of knowing, our way of loving, and the many obstacles we place in the way of centring our lives on and for love. This is precisely what St. Thomas meant when he identified humility with truth in one's judgement of oneself (Aquino 1994, p. 520), something that has nothing to do with a lack of self-esteem but, on the contrary, with the process of self-knowledge. Truth always makes us more vulnerable and, perhaps for that very reason, far more clear-sighted and open to others, people with whom we no longer need to compare ourselves and whom we no longer need to envy (Torralba 2021, p. 23).

The virtue of humility was also essential for the Breton Dominican, so as not to fall into a form of activism marked by personal vanity, self-love, indifference, or dependence on the external judgement of others. From this perspective, the daily prayer he proposed for all believers is illuminating:

> O God, I ask you to free me from my pettiness; to save me from all self-centredness, all conformism, all snobbery; to keep me far from slogans and myths; to shatter my masks and grant me absolute simplicity; to strip me of my naivety without making me distrustful or indifferent; that I may not seek h r honours, that I may prefer failure to lies; that I may be tenacious without obstinacy, firm without harshness, good without hope of recognition; that I may be helpful without servility, humble without renunciation, effective without agitation. (Lebret 1955, p. 23)

(B.) *The search for truth as an openness to the vulnerability of others*

At the community level, the second great quest of this mysticism of Truth concerns the effective construction of a more just world. For Aristotle, justice was the only virtue for which he did not specify a golden mean given its intrinsically relational nature. This is so because humility also makes us more receptive, more tolerant, and more open to others, which is another form of human lucidity.

For Lebret, this second quest for truth related to justice is empathetic and rooted in a compassionate awareness of the suffering of others. Far from any philanthropic sentiment or merely benevolent ethical value, it demands the effectiveness of our acts of solidarity based on the demand for universal justice for all human beings. Therefore, for Lebret, "Justice is the truth that springs forth and makes its way in relationships between people" (Lebret 1963, p. 50).

The believer's spirituality cannot, therefore, be merely a mental reality compatible with any lifestyle. The struggle to build the Kingdom of God and to realize its justice also demands the transformation and engagement of the whole human person: transforming thought by breaking through ignorance, transforming the will by directing it towards universal solidarity, and transforming commitment into a concrete struggle against the suffering of all human beings. Both poles of the search for truth, the personal and the communal, are mutually required and reinforced within this divine logic of love:

> The passion for truth [. . .]. You have launched me into the great adventure, the one in which one can only remain oneself by being in You [. . .]. It is a matter of

> exposing hypocrisies, dispelling ignorance, shattering superstitions, unmasking false gods [...]. It is a matter of restoring You to Your place, above all else, transcendent [...]. Your Kingdom is that of truth, and it is truth that sets us free. Grant me the courage to devote myself, obstinately, to the truth. (Lebret 1958a, pp. 153–54)

However, in this struggle to build the truth, we cannot allow ourselves to be held back by those who, given the complexity of human behaviour, neither relate to us with humility and empathy nor are willing to make just decisions. Yet for Lebret, the logic of grace, even when confronted with the worst imaginable human reactions, cannot lead us to deny the intrinsic link between the imperative to seek the truth and that of committing and giving oneself for others in its concrete realisation:

> When the behaviour of others is disloyal, when the truth is systematically distorted, when fidelity to one's word loses all meaning, no one can trust anyone... And nothing in political intrigue satisfies my dual thirst for the absolute: the absolute of truth, the absolute of giving of myself. [...] I feel within me an aspiration to be ever more myself, more authentic, through the habitual choice of what elevates me, through the progressive development of my freedom. (Lebret 1951b, pp. 52–53)

(C.) *The search for truth as vulnerability in the face of difference*

The gift of grace is not an elitist gift accessible only to a select few who consider themselves believers. Lebret makes an openly Christian proposal but broadens its scope to a spiritual dimension inherent in every human being. There is, therefore, a universal destiny of divine grace for the very reason that He created *all of us*, *without exception*, in His image and likeness. In the same way, the sacrifice of Jesus—who died and rose again as the definitive mediator of mercy between God and human beings—is offered to all humanity and thus represents the culmination of divine love. The expressions *"absolute truth*, absolute self-giving" convey, for Lebret, a universal destiny of God's mercy, even though not all human beings have the same time to recognise and accept what Lebret refers to elsewhere and in the same spirit as "the design of God inscribed in every human being" (Lebret 1958a, p. 21).

It is therefore not surprising to discover that Lebret was one of the great advocates, in his contributions to the Second Vatican Council, of a spiritual intelligence intrinsic to every person and, consequently, that each of the conciliar documents was addressed to all people of good will.

> In short, the third session marked a decisive turning point for Scheme XIII: the Council Fathers decided to address the document to all humanity, a decision without precedent in the history of councils. [...] Given the structural role played by this extensive introduction in the overall architecture of the Pastoral Constitution, Lebret's influence on the conciliar text is in no way diminished; rather, it is clearly reinforced. (Bordeyne 2005, p. 8)

Indeed, Gaudium et Spes took up this affirmation of the universality of grace and of the Paschal mystery of Christ for all human beings—later referred to as "anonymous believers"—while acknowledging our ignorance regarding the ways and times in which God's love will ultimately be recognised in them:

> This applies not only to Christians, but also to all human beings of good will, in whose hearts grace works invisibly. Christ died for all, and the supreme vocation of human beings is, in reality, one and the same, namely, the divine. Consequently,

> we must believe that the Holy Spirit offers everyone the possibility of sharing in this Paschal mystery in a way known only to God. (Gaudium et Spes 22)

There are numerous texts that could be cited in which Lebret expresses sincere appreciation and respect for the commitment to personal authenticity and the suffering of others shown by those who define themselves as non-believers (Lebret 1951a, pp. 8, 23). However, perhaps none is as explicit and symbolic as his prayer for communists:

> I believe I must pray for all these human beings, because you have created them in your image and because Christ Jesus died for them. I believe I cannot exclude any human being from my love, because every person is your work and because there are values in each of them. We must love all that is of value in every person and we must wish for each one an even greater growth in those values. (Lebret 1967, pp. 122–23)

This is a spiritual intelligence—the very assertion of which highlights its countercultural nature in our contemporary world, where only that which is factually demonstrable, useful, or mathematically measurable is granted cognitive legitimacy. Yet, spiritual intelligence now finds support in scientific discourse *as the intelligence of the soul*:

> It is the intelligence with which we heal and restore ourselves. Many of us today live lives of wounded fragmentation. We yearn for what the poet T. S. Eliot called a deeper union, a deeper communion, but we find few resources in our ego or in the existing symbols and institutions of our culture. (Zohar 2012, pp. 9–10)

Gratuitousness places us in a position that is fundamentally at odds with the logic of maximising economic profit. It opens us up to gratitude and, through it, in the words of Fr. Lebret, to the absolute of truth, to the absolute of self-giving, to God's plan within us, and to our spirit. Spiritual intelligence is present in all human beings, and it is this intelligence—whether rooted in religion or not—that enables us to understand our own lives as the fruit and legacy of the dedication of many others.

Viewing our lives in terms of gratitude, as a gift, compels us rethink our anthropological model of the human person. The spiritual dimension allows us to step outside ourselves, rather than seeing ourselves as the centre of the world, and to move beyond our own interests as the sole legitimate criterion for decision-making. Spiritual life opens us up to the needs of others, and it is in this openness that we find the joy of discovering the best in ourselves. Opening ourselves to others reveals the intrinsic and most important characteristic of human beings: our relational nature. We are shaped by the quality of our relationships with the people around us, not with the things we possess. Changing the anthropological model—the understanding of what is essential in life—constitutes the second pillar of his spirituality. We are what we love, and this too is inscribed within us, for we come from love and towards love we go.

3.2. The Human Being as the Image of God: The Human Being Is Relationship

Father Lebret's anthropological perspective is rooted in the biblical affirmation that human beings are created in the image of God. Human beings are drawn into this loving dynamic of creation and return, which defines them as essentially relational beings. God has created human beings as his "you", as beings capable of entering a relationship with Him, the One who is intrinsically constituted by his own Trinitarian communion of love. God thus makes human beings participants in his Trinitarian relational life and, therefore, the only creatures brought into existence by love and for love through his Spirit.

This unique divine initiative, confirmed in the very mystery of the Incarnation, confers upon human beings a dignity that transcends their biological constitution. The fact that we have been created in the divine image makes us, however weakly, intrinsically spiritual and

relational beings. Thus, it is precisely through relationships that we express and cultivate the highest dimensions of our humanity. Mounier articulated this spiritual dimension of the human person with remarkable clarity:

> The person is the totality of the human being. It is a balance of length, breadth and depth, a tension within every human being between its three spiritual dimensions: that which rises from below and individualises it in a body; that which is oriented towards the heights and elevates it to the universal; and that which extends outwards and impels it towards communion. Incarnation, vocation, communion: three dimensions of the person. (Mounier 1949, p. 57)

Modern individualism has seriously eroded something as essential to the human being as this spiritual dimension and its consequent ontologically relational nature. In his work dedicated to the spiritual thought of Fr. Lebret, Fr. Suavet identifies three spiritual characteristics of every human person that prevent the human being from ever being reduced to an instrumental, perishable, or utilitarian image of themselves:

> Of all earthly beings, he is the only one whom God created in his image: his spiritual soul makes him a free being. Other living beings are mortal; he, however, is made for immortality. God speaks to him as a friend speaks to another friend. (Suavet 1959, p. 22)

(A.) *Being the image of God: Free to love*

The relational nature with which God constitutes human beings also shapes them as responsible beings. The logic of love to which God has raised us not only renders us worthy of relating to Him, but also to all other living beings. When Kant, with admiration, distinguished the starry heavens from the moral law within me (Kant 2002, p. 197), he was not merely making an aesthetic observation. Rather, he was drawing a decisive distinction between the natural world—governed by necessary physical laws—and the human world, characterised by moral autonomy, which grounds the inviolable dignity of the human person. However, within this account of moral reason, he left implicit the transcendent and relational foundation upon which it was built.

Thus, for Lebret, true Christian freedom arises as the fruit of divine charity and is therefore oriented toward decisions that bind the individual to an inalienable responsibility of commitment to one's brothers and sisters, even when such decisions may, at times, conflict with one's own interests:

> The freedom of the Christian, gradually imbued with charity, is neither the freedom of licence nor liberation from the limitations of nature. . . The Christian who is faithful to God is the freest person there can be. His very love, which unites him to God and to all that exists through God, has set him free. 'Love and do what you will,' said St Augustine. (Lebret 1958a, p. 85)

It is a constructive freedom born of love, rooted in divine mercy, and grounded in a responsibility that shapes my relationship with all living beings and with myself:

> Love and do what you will, says God too. . . By limiting your possessions to that which makes you more, you cease to be a prisoner of what you have: you become its master. By not letting yourself be carried away by your whims, you have acquired prudence. By respecting every human being and dedicating yourself to the common good, you have acquired justice. By fighting vigorously against evil, you have acquired strength. . . Charity leads you to practise all the virtues spontaneously. By always desiring the best, you do what you desire. You are free. (Lebret 1958a, pp. 85–86)

Lebret's text explicitly warns against becoming prisoners of our possessions. The exercise of dominion over them reflects his implicit adherence to the Thomist view that private property (where *dominium* must not be confused with a natural law of ownership) is legitimate, yet always relative to the responsible use made of it. For Lebret, what properly belongs to natural law is the universal destination of goods, that is, the common good towards which they are teleologically ordered. Lebret links this attitude towards material goods and nature with divine mercy, once again promoting a stance of loving and responsible care for all that exists, in contrast to the predatory logic that exploits nature without regard for one's own needs or those of others. This perspective anticipates what Pope Francis would later develop under the concept of integral ecology.

(B.) *Being the image of God: loving with a vocation to eternity*

The fact that we have been created in the image of God not only obliges us to exercise our freedom responsibly but also directs our relationships towards a desire for the absolute—for eternity. The divine logic of love has raised us to this, and within this vertical relationship with God has been inscribed in us a longing for immortality. Perhaps for this reason, we are the first to resurrect in our memories those beings who have given us so much, whom we have loved so deeply, and whose death we would have wished never to come. Lebret already perceived that, precisely because this divine seal is inscribed within us, our lives lose their meaning when we exclude the logic of love from them. Hence, this underscores the importance, for Lebret, of redirecting our attention towards those ends that alone can give full meaning to our lives. For this reason, he lamented that we are increasingly preoccupied with the goals of instrumental reason, which can never fully satisfy us:

> Despite the need for truth that lies within him, modern man is more interested in the success of his affairs than in truth itself [. . .] If, in his pursuit of success, there is room for any concern for truth, it is nothing more than a pragmatic truth: a truth incapable of filling the void I feel within [. . .] nothing that is offered to me manages to quench my thirst for the absolute. (Lebret 1951b, p. 51)

It is perhaps no coincidence that our society conceals the reality of death as if it were insignificant, thereby obscuring that second dimension of the spiritual soul which opens it upwards to God and elevates it to the universal. Death confronts us, more radically than any other human experience, with the fundamental question of the ultimate meaning of our lives; for human beings, no answer will suffice, for we are made for love and communion, and these always hope to unfold forever. God has made us in his image and created us for love and for life, and neither of these ends can be measured by short-term results. God's love is unconditional and eternal:

> As an absolute value, which God has chosen for himself as an end, every human being comes into existence with a vocation to finality: 'To whom God speaks, whether in wrath or in grace,' said Luther, 'he speaks for ever.' Man is the creature of whom God remembers (Ps 8: 'What is man that you should remember him?'), the being indelibly anchored in the divine memory. God has created him for life, not for death; that creative act implies the promise of a victory over mortal destiny, a promise that the Christian faith expresses through the concept of resurrection. (de la Peña 1996, p. 35)

This absolute of immortality opens us to the contemplation of the mystery of the Incarnation. If Christ has not risen, our faith is in vain. In Jesus Christ, in his Incarnation, the human being is definitively raised to the eternal logic of divine charity. In Him and through Him, we come to understand the absolute gift that opens us to the Mystery, to the absolute of Truth, but also to the absolute of self-surrender: "A single love can synthesise

the love of God, love of oneself, love for every human being, love for humanity and even love for Nature: it is love for Christ" (Lebret 1949a, p. 81).

(C.) *Being the image of God: Subjects by virtue of his friendship*

The third characteristic of the Christian anthropological model, as interpreted by Fr. Lebret, is perhaps the one that is truly essential to his entire approach. It refers to the way in which God has raised us to the status of subjects capable of entering into friendship with Him. It is a third gift that becomes a reality—alongside the gift of grace and that of having been created in His image and likeness—in the mystery of the Incarnation:

> Man cannot become God except through the divine gift of the Incarnation. Since God, out of love, consented to such *kenosis*, [. . .] Christ is the sole mediator: by reconciling divinity and humanity in the unity of his person, it is through him that the human being can be supernaturally raised to a share in the intra-divine life. (Boncour 2024, p. 334)

Once again, this relational nature of the human person lies at the heart of Lebret's spiritual understanding. This third dimension reveals the relationship with God in its horizontal aspect, that is, the dynamic that opens us to his self-giving, whilst calling us to examine our own self-giving towards others. When speaking of communion, there can be no greater love than that which gives one's life for others. The mystery of the Incarnation exemplifies, more than any other event, the unconditional and boundless nature of God's love, which humbles itself even unto death on the Cross. It is in this communion with Jesus that Lebret grounds the origin of our necessary commitment to the suffering of our brothers and sisters. Entering the logic of divine love, which humbled itself to the very depths to lift us out of our poverty, can only awaken in us the desire to return, in some small measure, that love by striving to do the same for others:

> I cannot love God without being merciful to God, without the miseries of the world having overwhelmed me and penetrated my heart, without habitually bearing their anguish. . . I do not belong to myself; I belong to wretched humanity, and consecrating my life to its service has become for me the most pressing of needs. (Lebret 1958a, p. 41)

Lebret draws on the motto of the Dominican Order, *contemplata aliis tradere*, while taking care to explain its dialectical, rather than unidirectional, nature. The usual translation "*to contemplate and pass on what has been contemplated*" suggests a dualism between contemplation and action, a dualism from which Lebret consistently distances himself, avoiding the reductive extremes that such a division might foster:

> Action, from this perspective, is not an activity tacked onto the inner life to disrupt it to a greater or lesser extent. Action and contemplation are not separate. Action is latent within contemplation; it is entirely imbued with it. Inner life and outer life are united in a unity far removed from activism—that is, acting for the sake of acting, or to shine, or to feel powerful within a group that moves the world—and, on the other hand, from spiritual escapism, in which one feeds on the illusion of reaching God with a heart empty of love (Lebret 1951b, p. 164).

This divine friendship to which God himself has raised us, this communion, explains why, for Lebret, action attains the status of a spiritual principle. The spirituality of action, which situates acting within the spiritual relationship itself, does not imply that action is merely its fruit; rather, both are dialectically intertwined in a reciprocal movement. Another important text is his reflection on the Eucharistic celebration, in which he demonstrates the indissoluble and mutually enriching unity between mysticism and ethics:

> It is simply a matter of bearing witness to this by intelligently and lovingly integrating all my activity into God's overall plan. It is the Mass that continues, that permeates everything [. . .] It is the uninterrupted sacrifice: everything that is done, everything that is touched, everything that is accomplished, when oriented towards God through the inner gesture of the human being, is the sacred that permeates all of life. (Lebret 1945, p. 100)

Father Lebret's anthropological model stands in direct contrast to the model of modern individualism (Halévy 1907), characterised by a vision of the human person defined by selfishness and utilitarian instrumental logic, an approach that has become so globalised that "a general economy of humanity has, in effect, been imposed, according to which all human relations are governed by the consideration of personal utility" (Laval 2007, p. 17).

We have also discovered that the generative AI revolution may reinforce this trend in social life, thereby jeopardising the future of our democracies on a global scale (Cortina Orts 2024, p. 147). Political action placed in the hands of machines can, as has been demonstrated, be exploited to serve hatred and economic interests rather than empathy and communion among human beings:

> In 2016, Facebook's business model was based on driving user engagement. . . Consequently, human executives decided that the company's algorithms should focus on the primary goal of increasing it. Thus, the algorithms discovered that outrage generated engagement. We humans are more likely to engage with a hate-filled conspiracy theory than with a sermon on compassion. Thus, in pursuit of user engagement, the algorithms made the terrible decision to amplify outrage. (Harari 2024, p. 245)

Father Lebret's spirituality is an antidote to indifference toward situations and people. Only those who live with a spirit of trust and communion can understand this, for such a person has learned to step outside themselves. We must reclaim our vulnerability, within which the "we" and the common good are not merely possible elements, but indispensable components of our personal identity. His anthropological vision not only prioritizes our intrinsic relational nature but also reminds us that the absolute of truth is inseparable from the absolute of self-giving. To this we shall dedicate his third spiritual pillar.

3.3. Solidarity as a Political Act of Mercy

Father Lebret was, above all, a man of faith who knew from personal experience that God is not a theoretical principle: "He knew it from experience, he lived it: he perceived in the world's inconsistencies the gaps opening onto mystery, and when he spoke, through them one could perceive the terrible and comforting experience of having seen the invisible [. . .] Vincent Cosmao, speech delivered on 19 June 1967" (Malley 1968, p. 103). The Christian God enters human history through his love and, by this very power, invites us to love him with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our strength. Lebret was a believer who impressed others with his authenticity.

To discover oneself as radically human is to recognise one's own vulnerability through the suffering of others and, moved by indignation and a sense of injustice, to respond with a lifelong commitment to fight against poverty and every condition that hinders integral human development:

> Love them to the point where you cannot bear to see them deeply unhappy. . . Your task is not only to console them, but also to prevent them from remaining in destitution whilst you eat. . . The lack of hygiene in their homes, the poor quality of their food, the poor upbringing of their children, their debauchery: everything that degrades them must tear at your own heart. (Lebret 1945, pp. 96–97)

For Lebret, mercy derives its true meaning from the two Latin roots *miseria* and *cordis*, meaning to take on the misery of others as one's own and to feel compassion. Sharing in human suffering becomes a space for self-understanding, an epistemological principle that structures and underpins an entire methodology of action (unmasking suffering, seeking its causes, striving to find solutions). The political act of mercy involves taking sides and becoming the voice of those who have none, in its well-known *prise en charge* ("*taking* charge"):

> *Taking charge* To assume responsibility is the act of firm will and resolute love through which the activist assumes, before his soul and before God, responsibility for a specific group of people. The activist binds himself to that part of humanity... It is a matter of being with, thinking with, loving with, growing with. (Lebret 1946–1947, pp. 38–39)

Here, Lebret anticipates both the later Zubirian concept of responsibility and a central insight of Liberation Theology, namely, that every point of view necessarily arises from a particular perspective and, therefore, implies a prior taking of sides, however implicit it may be. In this sense, Lebret also dismantles the ideology of the Christian's supposed political neutrality:

> The temporal is by no means impure... To turn a blind eye to the temporal is to allow injustice to reign, and on a grand scale; it is to cede ground to the enemies of the common good; in short, it is to betray. (Lebret 1949a, p. 55)

For Lebret, failing to commit to the construction of the common good constitutes a betrayal of those who, due to life's circumstances, possess less power, less knowledge, and fewer means to defend themselves. Indeed, the term "neutrality", in his view, is ideological insofar as it merely legitimises complacent inaction:

> No historical structure is pure enough to be accepted without reservation... However, the absence of choice still constitutes a choice. To abstain is always to favour the cause of those in power, or of the strongest who are on the verge of seizing power... Often, it is better to be wrong than to do nothing. (Lebret 1949a, p. 50)

Today, the very idea of effective mercy may seem almost an aporia to us, as we tend to associate effectiveness exclusively with the rational validity of economic decisions. However, in Lebret's spirituality, effectiveness is a condition of possibility: without it, we would have nothing but fine words. Perhaps for this reason, in his spiritual writings, he refused to speak in abstract terms about the economic structures that cause so much suffering. For the same reason, his spirituality journal, the only one to survive independently following the merger of the publications *of Économie et* Humanisme, was titled *Efficacité*. For Lebret, the noblest ideas must never be invoked in vain; they must always be accompanied by rigorous methodological monitoring and concrete, assessable measures, safeguarding both the sincerity of those who undertake them and the credibility of those who receive them:

> To take the people's misery to heart. It is the least deserved, the most persistent, the most oppressive and the most disastrous. And the people have no one to protect them from it or to free them from its burden. Many feels pity for them, some help them, but almost no one addresses the root causes. Hence the ineffectiveness of philanthropy, aid and charity. (Lebret 1945, pp. 14–15)

Paradoxically, Bauman also reflected on contemporary *agency*, which he argued is mediated by technology. A technology which, thanks to a qualitative leap, is no longer neutral in its consequences, neither for nature nor for human beings, but can shape our very being:

> Today, it is technology that does not allow you to remain on the sidelines [. . .] It is something that must be done because it is technologically feasible. Here there is a moral vacuum caused by a technology that has overtaken politics. Here are two manifestations of the new evil: insensitivity to human suffering and the desire to colonise privacy by stripping someone of their secrets. (Bauman and Donskis 2015, pp. 15–16)

According to the British sociologist, this indifference is evident today not only towards the poor, who no longer seem to command significant social attention, but also towards the powerful, who are driven from the public arena through humiliation whenever such tactics serve the interests of those behind them. It is curious that he characterises the evil of our time with the antonym of the third pillar of Fr. Lebret's spirituality: reconnecting with mercy in the face of human suffering. This is a mercy that connects us to its divine source, and a mercy that is called to be realised in the transformation of a better world, in the building of his Kingdom.

Following one of St Ignatius' maxims "in times of desolation, do not change course" (Spiritual Exercises, 318), perhaps we should delve deeper into our sources of meaning, giving depth and truth to our convictions. Only through education can we help all people to reconnect their lives with the centre that truly gives them meaning.

> A holistic education should foster the development of openness to transcendence, understood as that which overflows and expands the limits of the person, as openness to the other from within, that is, from a transformative experience that reshapes relationships, and not from a superficial and reactive encounter. (Yúfera 2015, p. 692)

Reconnecting our lives with love means clinging to the conviction that good will ultimately triumph over evil. This requires hope: not a utopian desire that serves as an escape from reality, but the inner strength to face it with the loving confidence that, in our weakness, the fullness of God's merciful strength will be revealed.

3.4. Resilient Hope in the Face of the Difficulties of Building the Kingdom of God

If there was one thing Fr. Lebret was certain of, it was that our commitment could not be sustained without nourishing our hope: "Deepen your Christian life by better understanding the dimensions of God's plan. Do not forget the words of St Paul: "Everything belongs to you, everything is yours, but you belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God. Everything must be traced back to God through your actions and your offering" (Suavet 1968, pp. 141–42).

Action is a spiritual principle for Lebret because it must return to the love of God from which it originates. Thus, our friendship with God reveals its full meaning in the building of the Kingdom as a goal, as a loving *telos* that makes us "feel compelled to show that the Kingdom of God has already come, that salvation is already within everyone's reach; for in the Son and through Him, the human being is a child of God and can become, by the grace of adoption, what He is by nature" (Bara Bancel 2022, pp. 93–94).

When Lebret speaks of his horizon of aspirations, he sets forth a threefold ideal: the development of the human being in their entirety, of all human beings, and of the entire universe, so that all may find their place: "The opposite of misery is not abundance, but value. It is not primarily a matter of producing wealth, but of valuing man, humanity and the universe" (Lebret 1945, p. 15).

These aspirations are fully consistent with the philosophical principle that gives meaning to his entire ethical thought: *pour tout l'homme, pour tous les hommes*. His later openness to a third axis, represented by the entire universe, foreshadows a subsequent shift that would establish him as a pioneer of sustainability. He was among the first to

advocate before the UN for the concepts of sustainable development and the common good of the planet. Likewise, his conception of integral and balanced development influenced the Human Development Index (HDI, adopted by the UN in 1990), which encompasses the openness to transcendence as a basic human need, something for which he had fought so hard and which would also be taken up by the Magisterium of John Paul II in *Solicitudo Rei Socialis* (Sepúlveda Del Rio 2024, p. 588). For Lebret, therefore, no development is acceptable unless it safeguards the integral development of the person, social justice for all human beings, and care for future generations (Lavigne 2016).

Yet, concrete achievements also pass through difficult moments, confronting us with failure and forging our resilience. The same is true of our commitments: we may confuse genuine mercy with its instrumentalisation. The former, in Lebret's view, refers to the loving truth of self-giving, not to the utilitarian logic that often governs our lives, nor to the limited forms of solidarity that arise from it. Solidarity itself can be absorbed by an instrumental logic, ultimately undermining the very goals we seek to achieve and, at times, leaving those we wish to help with the sense of having been used:

> We would like to allow ourselves to be shaped by his glory without allowing ourselves to be shaped by his suffering; to resemble him without being disturbed by social scourges, without being moved by wars in which we are not involved, without being disturbed by the torture and deportations suffered by others. (Lebret 1958a, pp. 99–100)

Lebret understood that crises of meaning are the most complex. The human spirit is the place where vital meaning is created and where inner strength resides. However, meaning requires silence, the oxygen it needs to live. A contemporary philosopher has pointed out this deficiency:

> The digital information invasion, like noise, overwhelms attention. Only contemplative attention can access silence. The din of information and communication that assaults the soul is far more destructive than the din of the machines of modernity [...]. (Han 2025, pp. 70–71)

Recovering silence allows us to turn inwards and reconnect with God's love, our fundamental purpose. Only silence allows us to focus on our spirit, to create something new, always potentially oriented towards love (Lavigne 2022, p. 8). It is in love that the spirit is revived, is nourished, and enables us to be more, to become better human beings:

> By moving ceaselessly from God to the world and from the world to God, the committed Christian who wishes to persevere in their struggle and build an ever-better world for human beings is necessarily a contemplative (Lebret 1951b)

The recent experiences brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and the escalating threat of a potential nuclear war have led us to question, in our conversations and with greater urgency, the meaning and priorities we assign to our lives. Simone Weil wrote that slavery is the absence of meaning and spirituality in work and human action:

> "The great pain of manual labour is that one is forced to toil for so many hours simply to survive [...] Slavery is work without the light of eternity, without poetry, without religion" (Weil 1988, pp. 273–74). Spirituality determines the meaning and purpose of our existence and, through them, the mark we wish to leave behind.

For Lebret, true personal development is oriented towards this ontological excellence, in which we surpass ourselves by allowing ourselves to be guided by the logic of love. It is this logic of love alone that can fulfil our inner desire to be better and that guides us towards the primary commitment of all, which he designated as la *montée humaine*. This is

a commitment that will never be content merely with not harming the other person but will do everything necessary to help them become a better person too. It is the logic of love that leads us to rediscover reasons for hope rather than desolation.

At the end of his 1963 Christmas message—three years before his death, and the last of its kind addressed to the friends of Economy and Humanism—Lebret concludes with an exhortation to hope, to love expressed in the future tense, in what could be the true refrain of his life's song: "We need to move forward in hope, driven by a greater love for humanity; charity must burn within us" (Suavet 1968, p. 158).

Perhaps in this context, in which we are called upon to examine the logic and meaning that guide our lives, we can understand Fr. Lebret's passionate eulogy of folly—with clear Pauline overtones—by which he describes those who have the courage to live according to the Spirit of God:

> "There are too many wise men, too many prudent men [. . .] The injustice of the world is, at heart, the bulwark of their privileges. They have already chosen, consciously, to resist the Holy Spirit [. . .] We need madmen, passionate people, people capable of taking the leap into insecurity [. . .] Some who accept the risk of getting lost in the anonymous crowd without any desire to use it as a springboard, and others who use their acquired superiority solely to serve it". (Lebret 1949c, p. 188)

4. Conclusions

This article presents the content of Fr. Lebret's spirituality in a holistic and structured manner. Much less studied than his ethical or socio-economic thought, this article presents an analysis of its main themes, demonstrating its relevance for understanding the inherent coherence of the entirety of his work. To this end, this article provides three innovative approaches.

First, this article presents a detailed biography, drawing on some novel insights from unpublished primary sources, while focusing less on the historical events experienced by Fr. Lebret than on the intellectual impact these had, particularly on his ethical and spiritual work. This section highlights the extent to which Lebret's concrete and effective commitments to the people with whom he shared his life were central to his thought. Lebret was never a mere theorist; rather, each of the ethical and spiritual concepts in his work responds to the specific questions and needs of the people with whom he engaged as one of their own throughout his life.

Second, this article explores the Dominican roots of his spirituality, highlighting the novel relationship Lebret proposes with ethics by reinterpreting the Dominican principle *contemplata aliis tradere* not as a one-way process, but as a circular relationship that constantly feeds back into itself. Thus, effective action against suffering verifies and lends credibility to the spirituality that sustains it, while at the same time becoming a spiritual principle, embodying the transcendent presence of God's love in every moment and in every place where love is made present. In this way, the action itself brings us back to silence, to the spiritual space, to the loving presence of God, who once again sends us forth to give freely what we have freely received.

Third, this article highlights how, despite the need for linguistic updating, Fr. Lebret's spirituality possesses the inner strength necessary to inspire people today. First, it is a spirituality of vulnerability that speaks to the hearts of the disadvantaged and those who feel wounded for countless reasons, encouraging them to maintain hope in the face of their own vulnerability and in the struggle against indifference to the suffering of others, as well as to *the absolute of truth* that resonates within us. Second, it is a spirituality that inspires and drives us, in the face of resignation, towards *the absolute of self-giving*, inviting us to

rediscover the logic of the gift, our relational nature, and our merciful commitment, which are the educational and axiological keys to a new civilisation of solidarity.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analysed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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