



Apostles for Today

Reflection and Prayer - March 2012

God the Infinite Love

Meditation 30 (OCC XIII, pp. 161-166)

“The Infinite Love and Mercy of Our Lord Jesus Christ in the Choice of the Twelve Apostles”.

When I first read this meditation, my immediate reaction was, “Oh no, oh Lord, why this topic, why me?” Although a priest, I find it a challenge to write honestly on the topic of Saint Vincent’s meditation on ministerial priesthood in a way that will have some chance of being life-giving for the wide variety of people who will read this reflection. But then the image came to mind of the grain of sand or some other small object which acts as an irritant or stimulus to the oyster, leading to the formation of a pearl. It can be that when we find things uncomfortable, when we are forced to struggle in order to reflect more deeply and more personally on an area which we find challenging, something precious *may* come of it. That at least is my hope!

Why do I find this topic a challenge? Well, I come from a culture in which the profoundly damaging actions of some members of the ministerial priesthood have formed a substantial part of the daily diet in the mass media for almost 20 years, failures seriously compounded by the generally wholly inadequate response of many religious superiors and bishops to address in a just, compassionate, decisive and transparent way the pain of those who were deeply hurt through abuse suffered at the hands of ordained ministers and to protect other young and vulnerable people from future harm at the hands of those same ministers. Serious questions have been raised as to the adequacy of the

response of the Church leadership at every level to this scandal and crisis. Ministerial priesthood in general in our culture was marked by an unhealthy clericalism, priests being seen in some way as belonging to a higher caste than the “ordinary” Christian, one result of which was that, in practical terms, the good of the Church was judged to lie more in protecting the good name of that priesthood than in protecting the young and vulnerable from harm. Church leaders were noted more often than not for exercising their authority in a harsh, domineering and controlling manner, reflecting a harsh, domineering and controlling image of God, and this too has left its mark in our culture on many peoples’ image of God and of the ordained ministry. And I don’t think that our culture is alone in that.

In such a climate, a reflection such as St. Vincent’s which speaks in unequivocally positive terms about the gift that ministerial priesthood is can seem a little incomplete to say the least. And yet, Saint Vincent was no starry-eyed romantic; he was well aware of the failings of many priests in his own time, and of the inadequacy of an image of Church leadership which reduced the role of lay Christians to one of little more than spectators in the great drama of salvation history.

However, St. Vincent’s response was one of faith, faith primarily in God’s unfailing love made visible in Christ for all people, each one a unique living image and likeness of the infinite love and goodness which is God. But faith also in the gifts which God has given us in order to continue to help make this transforming love a tangible reality in our daily lives. He begins each of his 31 reflections in God the Infinite Love with the expression “Enlightened by faith” or something equivalent. It is only with the eyes of faith that we can discern the true value of God’s gifts and of their importance for our lives and for the lives of others. This is true also of the gift of ministerial priesthood.

What aspects strike me in his reflection? His clearly biblical rooting of the call and sending of the apostles and of those who would succeed them in that of Jesus himself: their mission is to be, in a particular way, a sharing in and a continuation of Christ’s own call and sending by the

Father. They are sent to announce Christ's salvation to all, to proclaim his Kingdom to the whole world for the good of all, to take his place as "true shepherds... leading [others] to true pastures of eternal life", "spiritual doctors... curing spiritual ills" and "loving fathers" guarding "[them] in [God's] Divine Heart". It is Jesus himself who is working through their visible pastoral ministry to communicate his own invisible life to us, so that to listen or to reject their Gospel message is to listen or to reject Christ himself and the Father who sent him.

That is quite a commission! It is a commission also open to misinterpretation and distortion in how it is understood and lived as has been all too evident in the Church's long history, at times leading to a sense of privilege far from the Gospel ideal of the poor, humble, Christ who came not to be served but to serve, to pour himself out without reserve as the deepest possible expression of the infinite depths of God's love for an often lost and broken humanity. St. Vincent's use of the terms "shepherd", "doctor" and "father" above hint at a priesthood modelled on the compassion and tenderness of Christ, a priesthood which lives out Christ's paradoxical call to greatness by becoming last of all and servant of all.

And in St. Vincent's vision, this service is not one which seeks to control, but one which is called to inspire, to revive, to rekindle, to nurture, to challenge, but which also knows its own need to be constantly inspired, revived, rekindled, nurtured, challenged - yes, by God himself, but often working through other brothers and sisters in the community, and sometimes in the most unlikely and unexpected of others in the most unlikely and unexpected of ways. To be authentically Christian, such service cannot be understood and exercised in an individualistic, self-sufficient, paternalistic manner, but rather as a member of a family of equals, each with their own God-given dignity and call and gifts. It carries in itself an implicit call to learn to collaborate, *as equals, from the beginning*, with others of every state of life in the Church and even outside of it in order to build up God's kingdom of love and peace and justice in our world.

Yes, it is a call to a particular role in the family of God, a call to Christian leadership, a call to exercise in a particular way the authority of Christ, but in a way that is truly at the service of the good of others, to help them discover and exercise the fullness of their dignity and freedom and authority as children of God who share in the very life of the Blessed Trinity and the very priesthood of Christ himself through baptism, as people made in the image and likeness of infinite love and wisdom and truth. It is a call ultimately to be, in collaboration with others, a builder of a community of love and of truth, of joy and of peace, of compassion and of justice, of mutual respect and encouragement, of equality in difference, modelled on that eternal community of love which is God.

A friend of mine who is a priest with the order of St. John of God and works with people with special needs wrote a thesis on Christian leadership, and concluded that he would only become a truly Christ-like leader if he could learn to serve the deepest needs of a particular man with whom he worked who had profound learning difficulties and no verbal communication! Let us ask the God of all consolation to grant us an ever-deepening gift of that kind of Christian leadership in our communities, to help each one of us to exercise leadership in a way that serves to lead others to the fullness of life which Christ desires for us as individuals and as members of the Christian and of the human families.

Some questions for reflection as we continue our Lenten journey:

What is my experience of leadership in the Christian community? In the UAC?

What for me would constitute truly Christian leadership? Are there people who embody this for me?

How do I exercise leadership in my own life? At work? In my family?

Where do I need to grow in humble and generous service and in my collaboration with others?