



Apostles for Today

Prayer and Reflection - September 2014

New Evangelisation and Vulnerability

New Evangelization is all the talk in the Church now and I'm a bit tired of it, somewhat suffocated by its relentless demand for new ways of doing things. I've tried many things and none of them seem to work in the sense that none of them endure or last for long enough.

We evangelize by the essence of who and how we are. We evangelize by presence, a presence that is a living, personal experience of Jesus Christ. Sometimes who and how we are is not pleasant at all and would not seem to be very valuable in the work of evangelization. Sometimes even our experience of God is very unpleasant and all the joy of the gospel that is being demanded of us is utterly impossible.

In a reflection on the authority of Peter, Hans Urs von Balthasar speaks about the position one must occupy in leadership. *“The lowest place, which is where the servus servorum (servant of the servants) must stand, the place of final contempt and insult, the rubbish-heap on which one is ‘a worm and not a man’, this place which no man occupies willingly, is precisely the place where the office which he exercises may regain the greatest possible respect and credibility.”*

The leader, the person in authority somehow embodies the whole reality of the community. The leader experiences how the community is and vice versa. We are one body, one spirit in Christ. What is asked of the person in authority is asked of us all.

How many of us aspire to occupy the place of final contempt, to be on the rubbish-heap of life, to be a worm and no man? Probably no one! Yet it is the place which we are called to occupy because it is the place Jesus occupied.

I was invited a few years ago to give a talk on *‘The Relevance Of The Church’* and, as I prepared this talk, I fantasized about large numbers of highly energized Catholics gathered in prayer and going out from prayer to enthusiastically transform society in very meaningful ways.

We have memories of Saint John Paul II filling a stadium; there are smaller but meaningful memories of Spirit-filled prayer meetings that set on fire the hearts of those involved and we thought we could take on the world; many of us come from a past in which Catholicism made a real difference. We desire to make a difference, a difference which we ourselves control.

Control! To be in control is at the heart of a lot of human desire; we naturally fear losing control, being out of control. So we try to control life – ours and that of others – and sometimes our genuine aspiration to serve gets swallowed up in controlling.

I look at Jesus in Gethsemane, on Calvary and I see One who occupies the place of final contempt, who has surrendered control, who is a worm and no man. “Not my will but yours be done!” I look at Jesus and I realize again that where He is where I am called to be, where we His Church are called to be.

In the West it has been done to us. We have been stripped of all glory and power; we are derided and mocked; we are irrelevant. But I suspect that we have not yet understood that this is where we are meant to be. We are still hoping that we will be restored.

Even those who seek genuine reform in the Church cannot envisage it being irrelevant, on the rubbish heap because we are trying to get ourselves out of the rubbish heap as fast as possible. Yet here we must abide until we have learned to become *ananim*, truly lowly, until the hour of our deliverance arrives.

There is a true sense that we have come close to lowliness in Pope Francis. He is pointing us in the direction of a more authentic way of being Christian but what he is offering, what God is offering in him has to become the personal reality of every single one of us.

The reform and renewal of the Church begins in the interior life of each one of us and it depends on how each of us responds to the reality of being the least of all and the last of all.

A Pallottine priest died recently. He was 83 years old and had Alzheimer’s or dementia for the past few years. We know that this is a very common reality in these times and it is something many of us fear. The gospel reading at his funeral Mass was from John 21 where Jesus said to Peter, “*Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where*

you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go."

End of life experiences have a lot to teach us about surrendering to the mystery of God's action in our lives when we are most vulnerable and when we lose control over every detail of our lives. It strikes me that in the course of all of life we are being given opportunities, through "*rubbish-heap*" experiences, to become the little poor who learn to depend on God for everything. As we journey through life we can engage in an ongoing lesson of surrendering and letting go so that when the final surrender comes we are prepared for it.

An inspiring aspect that I have witnessed in many people with dementia is that, when they have forgotten everything else, they retain a memory of prayer and a lifelong spirituality is somehow carved into the core of their being. Celebrating Mass in a Retirement Home, where most residents have dementia, the vast majority of them pray the Mass out loud with the priest; at the elevation of the sacred host and chalice they whisper "*My Lord and my God*" which has a particular significance in the history of Christian spirituality in Ireland.

We have just celebrated the funeral of a former Prime Minister who was a devoted Catholic. He too experienced dementia and one of the memories spoken of at his funeral was of him and his wife sitting on their bed praying the Hail Mary.

The eyes of the world look on at the reality of dementia and they see a disaster; the eyes of faith perceive the mystery of God's action and communion with the soul of the faithful that is now in a state of near perfect surrender, one from who all freedom and control has been taken away.

Theirs is the hand stretched out to take the Hand of the Other who leads them where they do not want but need to go. It isn't always pleasant or pretty, sometimes it is funny and joyful, but always it is their testament of faith, their act of evangelization in this present age.

Part of our evangelization is to witness to and honour the loving, awesome presence of God in our present personal moments of brokenness, vulnerability, darkness. Part of our evangelization is to recognize and point to the presence of God in the lives of those who are experiencing dementia and to offer meaning to those who bear the burden of care for them.

For prayer:

Take a moment of stillness. Be attentive to your breathing. Breathe God in and out. Be attentive to what you are feeling as a result of reading or listening to the above reflection. Express your thoughts and feelings privately to God. Share them together in your group. Leave space for spontaneous prayer.

The following poem might be an appropriate conclusion:

Do not ask me to remember.
Don't try to make me understand.
Let me rest and know you're with me.
Kiss my cheek and hold my hand.
I'm confused beyond your concept.
I am sad and sick and lost.
All I know is that I need you
To be with me at all costs.
Do not lose your patience with me.
Do not scold or curse or cry.
I can't help the way I'm acting.
Can't be different though I try.
Just remember that I need you,
That the best of me is gone.
Please don't fail to stand beside me.
Love me 'til my life is done.

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