



Apostles for Today

Prayer and Reflection - January 2016

The Mercy of the Father in Our Apostolate

“Ah my God, my infinite, immense, incomprehensible mercy!”.

“... And that notwithstanding that you have tolerated me until the present day and moment in your infinite mercy. Oh what love! Oh divine clemency! Oh incomprehensible mercy!”.

We often read and repeat these and other words inspired by Saint Vincent. I often ask myself if I will ever be able to repeat them with his same passion and consciousness. It seems impossible to me, looking at who I am now and my level of maturity. But in this, I am forgetting the gifts of God and think that I have to do everything by my own strength alone. So, what is the road to take? I cannot respond for everyone, but only look at the steps taken in my life and give my testimony, however slight it may be.

Very often I have heard it asked: “What must I do? What must we do?”, questions which are asked in our Union. What is to be done? We all know that Saint Vincent did not leave a specific work to be developed, as did many other founders: he did not leave it to us to dedicate ourselves particularly to the relief of the poor, to education, to the foundation of schools or hospitals, to social progress. Even if all of these things were very much present in his life: he practised them all, along with many others. It seems to me that he left us, together with the witness of his life, only one thing to do. We often summarise it in the fundamental demand: revive Faith, spread Charity! The inspiration of 1835... the May Appeal, gather everyone ... all are apostles! It seems to me that this does not put before us a specific thing to be done: it places all of our life before us, because the apostle is always an apostle, day and night, in doing one thing or another, or even in impossibility. Perhaps it is precisely for this that many asked themselves what must they do, disorientated regarding how to commit their own lives. What to do, for example, after having made the Act of Apostolic Commitment (how many times I have heard asked: “And now?”). I have also heard religious asking themselves the same thing, despite living lives already characterised by many aspects typical of their vocation.

I must confess that I have also asked this question, many years ago when I asked it of the person who had guided me in the footsteps of Faith (a Pallottine, imbued with the Founder’s experience of the Spirit); I seemed to have met God, to have

reflected on the Gospel, to also have reflected deeply on it and studied it, to have read spiritual writings profitably and to have listened to people who spoke to me of God. But even with all of this, I asked myself how I should live and in what should I commit myself. The Lord helped me, and I still thank Him, making me open my eyes a little: I saw that the one who bore witness to me of Faith lived an active charity, not just in words, but in life. At the service of everyone, in the most ordinary and everyday things, the simplest just as the more demanding, those which presented themselves every moment, but always in love towards the person. I saw others who were striving to live in the same manner and then understood that I had to undertake the same journey. I was struck by that apostolic, that authentically apostolic testimony, and wanted to live in the same manner myself, following that same Jesus who had been working in all of these people. The saints used to ask themselves: "If they can do it, why not I?". All of this had a name, which turned out to be a verb: to love. The Commandment of Jesus. Charity, the substantial constituent of the Pallottine Work. Then, slowly, the path opened: in order to be an apostle, strive to love. These words penetrated within and began to form the person I was. Without any merit on my part, I (we) had encountered a reality which filled my life (our lives). This Commandment of Jesus was not only able to fill one life, but a thousand lives, all lives. We could still have asked ourselves what we must do. Even when we can no longer do anything, Saint Vincent suggests to us how to live. Just recently in my place of work I had an experience which made me understand how much I am still only at the beginning of this path: I had an argument with one of my colleagues regarding a work matter on which there wasn't agreement. I was convinced of my good reasons and we discussed the matter. In the end my contention prevailed, and I was convinced of it. What I thought was correct, but I damaged my relationship with my colleague. I asked myself what mattered more for me: to be right or to maintain my friendship with my colleague? Afterwards it seemed evident to me: I preferred to have the person, rather than right, on my side, that faced with a person, being right no longer had much importance. In the following days I tried to repair the relationship, saying to him that we could reconsider the matter. Afterwards we returned to being good colleagues, even if it was not easy. I was taught not to be right, but to strive to love. What use to me is my work ability, my expertise, if I go on to alienate someone? A person to whom Christian life could be communicated?

How then can we ask ourselves what we should do, since from when we open our eyes in the morning, in all of the many occasions which present themselves in which to love concretely, to serve others, whoever they may be, therefore to be apostles? In the evening perhaps we may seem not to have achieved anything, to have lost ourselves in many gestures towards many people, and not to have built anything. But perhaps we are slowly becoming apostles.

This does not mean that it is not necessary to organise the apostolate; an ordered apostolate, in collaboration. This too was a precise desire of the Founder. But he well understood that without the substantial constituent there was no apostolate and whatever was done would be harmful.

In this I sense the great Mercy which surrounds us, that of God. At the end of the day it is in this that I place my life again, which only in this way has meaning.

Saint Vincent's life was completely suffused by mercy. Something which always struck people was his continual protestation of being the greatest sinner; this, however, did not make him doubt the mercy of the Father. He never thought of himself as not being the object of such love: and thus he was in turn towards everybody. In this way in his life he lived something which remained: it has remained in us, who follow his footprints, and it has remained in the Church - his charism. The Church has received it in a particular way in that great event of mercy which was the Second Vatican Council. The original inspiration, the holiness of the two Popes who conducted it (expressed in the opening and closing messages), all of the Council Fathers, all who worked with them and who prayed and participated in whatever way were, it seems to me, a witness of mercy towards the whole world. This was translated into a desire for dialogue, for encounter and reciprocal understanding with the world. For proclamation and for listening. For reciprocal forgiveness between those who had been divided.

It seems to me that to be apostles, people who strive in their lives to place charity in the first place in every situation and who, after failure, take up the path again, placing themselves in this path which is so much greater than ourselves, being part of a much larger plan which we do not see completely. We begin again every day to love (with those who are closer to us) in our concrete lives, we put ourselves again on the same path, begun long before us. We place ourselves on a track and are part of a plan of mercy.

In this long journey I seemed to sense that my life is not mine alone; my answer to the Lord is certainly personal, but not only: what happens in life is of God and for this reason I have to share it with others, placing this fragile treasure alongside that of all others, of those who walk with me, in the constant desire of receiving the same from all, so that a great treasure may be created, a common heritage, and we may carry our joys and sorrows together.

Mercy in the first place. This is the inspiration which comes to us from Pope Francis. It is to be translated into concrete actions, towards all, in the duty of being reconciled with God and with others, since God, who was also offended by us, did

not withdraw from love for us. Begin again therefore in our Union to cover everything with Mercy: it is not a concession on our part, but a commandment of Jesus. To live it between all of the components of the Union, every day. I like the expression: bet on God: it is an expression which was used much in the mission in Rome to young people. Bet your own life, and do not take it back, in following Jesus precisely in the path which the Jubilee is proposing to us; otherwise, sadly, we will go away like the rich young man.

I would now like to offer for the reflection, some short passages of the Founder, of the Pope and of a witness of our times.

From the *Lumi* of Saint Vincent Pallotti (n. 12): “I will endeavour to exercise the virtue of mercy toward all in the most perfect way that I possibly can”. This is also our desire.

When Saint Vincent calls all to spread Faith and rekindle Charity he becomes the (conscious) instrument of the Lord to bring all to Him, to Love, to Salvation. In this the Mercy of the Father is realised. In this the fundamental intention of the Second Vatican Council, which resound in the words of Pope Francis, is anticipated: “The Council Fathers strongly perceived, as a true breath of the Holy Spirit, a need to talk about God to men and women of their time in a more accessible way. ... The Church sensed a responsibility to be a living sign of the Father’s love in the world” (MV, n. 4). In this they imitated the Master. And again: “Jesus, seeing the crowds of people who followed him, realized that they were tired and exhausted, lost and without a guide, and he felt deep compassion for them” (MV, n. 8).

Finally, I would like to share a short passage from one of the most effective witnesses of our times, Cardinal F.X. Nguyen Van Thuan, Vietnamese, who from his long imprisonment wrote: “I am in prison. If I am waiting for the opportune moment to do something truly great, how many times in my life will similar occasions present themselves? No, I will seize the occasions that every day presents, to fulfil out ordinary actions in an extraordinary way. Jesus, I will not wait, I will live the present moment, filling it to the brim with love” (from: *Five loaves and two fish*, p. 20).

This is how witnesses live, how our Founder lived, how we wish to live every day. A heartfelt greeting to all for a good year in the Lord.

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Italy*