



E-BULLETIN #61

29-Mar-13

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*"Let the holiness of God shine forth" (cf. Mt 5,16)*

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item 115

## **shepherds living with 'the smell of the sheep'**

Pope Francis, remaining true to his universally loved patron, St Francis of Assisi, continues to create surprises almost every day. Wherever we go, people young and old in all walks of life speak about this new messenger of God. With astonishing simplicity and warmth he embraces all. His pastoral approach is best summarised in his startling expression that priests are called to be shepherds living with 'the smell of the sheep'!

Some of the reflections of Pope Francis on priesthood that he presented during his first Chrism Mass are particularly striking. These were the words he used to describe his vision of the ideal priest:

"...they are anointed for the poor, prisoners and the sick, for those who are sorrowing and alone. The ointment is not intended just to make us fragrant, much less to be kept in a jar, for then it would become rancid ... and the heart bitter".

"A good priest can be recognized by the way his people are anointed. When our people are anointed with the oil of gladness, it is obvious: for example, when they leave Mass looking as if they have heard good news. Our people like to hear the Gospel preached with 'unction', they like it when the Gospel we preach touches their daily lives, when it runs down like the oil of Aaron to the edges of reality, when it brings light to moments of extreme darkness, to the 'outskirts' where people of faith are most exposed to the onslaught of those who want to tear down their faith".

"We need to 'go out' then, in order to experience our own anointing, its power and its redemptive efficacy: to the 'outskirts' where there is suffering, bloodshed, blindness that longs for sight, and prisoners gripped by many evil masters. It is not in soul-searching or constant introspection that we encounter the Lord: self-help courses can be useful in life, but to live by going from one course to another, from one method to another, leads us to become pelagians and to minimize the power of grace, which comes alive and flourishes to the extent that we, in faith, go out and give ourselves and the Gospel to others, giving what little ointment we have to those who have nothing, nothing at all. A priest who seldom goes out of himself, who anoints little – I won't say 'not at all' because, thank God, our people take our oil from us anyway – misses out on the best from our people, on what can stir the depths of his priestly heart".

"Those who do not go out of themselves, instead of being mediators gradually become intermediaries, managers. We know the difference: the intermediary, the manager, 'has already received his reward', and since he doesn't put his own skin and his own heart on the line, he never hears a warm, heartfelt word of thanks. This is precisely the reason why some priests grow dissatisfied, become sad priests, lose heart and become in some sense collectors of antiques or novelties – instead of being shepherds living with 'the smell of the sheep', shepherds in the midst of their flock, fishers of men".

“True enough, the so-called crisis of priestly identity threatens us all and adds to the broader cultural crisis; but if we can resist its onslaught, we will be able to put out in the name of the Lord and cast our nets. It is not a bad thing that reality itself forces us to ‘put out into the deep’, where what we are by grace is clearly seen as pure grace, out into the deep of the contemporary world, where the only thing that counts is ‘unction’ – not function – and the nets which overflow with fish are those cast solely in the name of the One in whom we have put our trust – Jesus”.



These words paint the picture of a shepherd who goes to look for the lost sheep in the outermost geographical and existential corners of our world. When he finds it, the first thing he tells it is that God loves and forgives it, if only it will admit that it is in need of his mercy.

We cannot think of a better message than this for this Easter. We are living particularly in a difficult time when priests are looked at with scorn and ridicule in many countries. Crime of any sort whether it is done by a priest or any other human being is a manifestation of sin and has its consequences. Priesthood is not just a profession or a career, nor is the Church a mere human organisation administered with great efficiency. Priests should know, as the Holy Father said, that they are anointed “for the poor, prisoners and the sick, for those who are sorrowing and alone”. It makes very little sense when one lives for oneself totally absorbed about body weight, holidays, precious books and collections. It surprises me very much to see a priest waiting for his pension age so as to withdraw into a comfortable home to live alone with all his possessions. We can hardly describe him as a shepherd living with “the smell of the sheep”!

The challenge that Pope Francis presents before us is, in fact, nothing new. It is the only authentic way of living Christian discipleship as demanded by the example and teachings of the God-made-Man Jesus Christ. And, indeed, this is the only way!

Critics of the Church might dismiss these gestures and symbolisms of Pope Francis as just eye-wash. Some others are waiting to see how long they will last. Even within the Church some may be angered because they have already become unfamiliar with these Gospel values. But people in millions all over the world are beginning to be inspired and to see the election of Pope Francis as a new Pentecost. One confrere in Rome told me that a number of people came for Easter confession saying that Pope Francis has touched their lives and they have found their faith once again!

The scandal of the cross! The unfathomable depth of the Paschal Mystery! The paradox of Christian existence – “Those who die with Christ shall rise again in the newness of life”. If Pope Francis too has become a scandal, a paradox, it is a sign that he is following his Master’s path. Then there is the hope of resurrection and a new life.

By choosing to be humble and advocating a poor Church for the poor, Pope Francis has embraced the Jesus’ way. He is leading us to an encounter with the Risen Lord! If this Supreme Pastor has already touched our conscience, we have every reason to celebrate this Easter with much joy and hope. Indeed, as Pope Francis said, “a Christian can never remain sad...He or she is always a person of hope” for “He has risen indeed” Alleluia!

Wish you all the peace and joy of the Risen Lord.

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## “Rabboni”, “my Lord and my God”

My Risen Lord, as once again along with the entire community of Christians I have gone through the mysteries of your Passion, Death and Resurrection during this Holy Week, my earliest recollections of the liturgy returned.

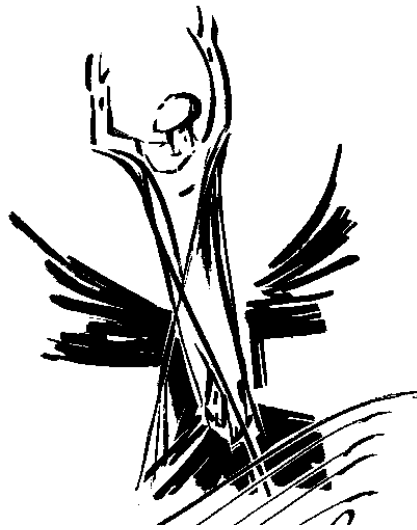
They went back to my childhood days, the ceremonies in our rural parish church. I vividly remembered the so-called funeral procession with a life sized statue of you – lifeless, pale, dead. It was very touching and sad, especially for a seven year old boy. And then, the Easter Vigil liturgy during in which a statue of a risen Christ emerged from a make-shift tomb in the sanctuary, the bursting of fire crackers and pealing of church bells. As children, we were thrilled to see the statue of a standing risen Jesus with a victorious flag!

But, Lord, as I reflected on those same mysteries as a nearly seventy year old priest the stark realities of your death and resurrection came to mind, far removed from childhood memories! There was no funeral procession for you, no crowd was crying! You didn't even have a decent Jewish burial! A few dedicated and devout women, and a couple of elderly men, hurriedly completed your interment.

For the first ever Easter Vigil, there were no fire crackers or pealing of bells as you rose in the silence of the night. Neither any joyous singing of “Exultet”, nor any mention of “felix culpa”! Not even a single human witness! It was and is, and will be, a Mystery.

It seems that none of your disciples or loved ones expected you to rise. To make it worse, none of them seemed to believe it when told that you had risen and were alive! Not even your hand picked Peter and John could comprehend it. Your closest and most faithful associate, Mary Magdalene, doesn't seem to have anticipated it! Lord Jesus, in your death you were abandoned, and in your victory you were alone!

Come to think of it, I wonder them? I too have been told Resurrection! Despite your didn't grasp it. Nor do I! Like my life, haven't I disappeared and from your burial site? I keep refusing to bury my failures and When it would have been most of the Cross I, like your disciples, disappointments, haven't I in the power and victory of your



about myself – am I any different from about your Passion, Death and teaching and warning them they them, for the safety and security of time and again from the foot the Cross refusing to be crucified, I keep weakness. Pain and failures, I shun. meaningful to stand by you at the foot stayed away! Through my despair and manifested many a time my unbelief Resurrection?

But today, my Risen Lord, my overcome by the way you dealt with your disappointing disciples. In spite of their desertion, and despite their disbelief in your Resurrection, not even once did you scold them. Not even once did you accuse them of being ungrateful! There was neither any trace of annoyance, nor of any anger, when you met them after your Resurrection. You had no hurt feelings! Lord, you had nothing but unconditional love for them which was expressed in your unlimited patience with them, and for them. You had unflinching hope in them. With your unfailing optimism you kept waiting for them to grow and transform.

My Risen Lord, during the three or so years of their training you called them your disciples. Just before your death you called them your friends. After your Resurrection, you called them your brothers.

My Risen Lord, you just kept upgrading your relationship with them: from disciples to friends, from friends to brothers. All the while they, in their turn, kept downgrading their relationship with you. So do I.

Despite abandoning you on the cross and absenting themselves from your burial, and disbelieving your Resurrection, you were neither angry with them nor resentful towards them. You just kept hoping and waiting for them to grow and to transform.

In spite of their betrayal, cowardice and callousness, You wished them Peace! Peace within themselves and peace with you! Peace in the form courage to leave behind their past failures. Sure, they didn't merit it. It was your free gift to them, your Easter gift!

My Risen Lord, gift me too with your peace! Peace with myself to accept my past failures and to say goodbye to them. May I make myself worthy to experience that peace in my day to day life!

Lord, I am deeply touched by Magdalene, your closest the empty tomb, troubled by saw you, she mistook you for

It is when you called her by then she recognized you as her

My Risen Lord, you are indeed your sheep by name. My Risen been repeatedly calling me by recognize you and respond to How long will it take for me to as "Rabboni"?



the manner you dealt with Mary associate. Mary stood weeping by your missing body. Though she the gardener.

name "Mary", it is then and only "Rabboni!"

the Good Shepherd who knows Lord, I know for certain you have my name. Sadly, I have yet to your call in a consistent manner. recognize you and respond to you

My Risen Lord, during this Easter season and in every day of my life, along with Mary Magdalene, I want to experience You as "Rabboni", the "Rabboni" who freed me of many a deadly compulsive demon.

Lord, with your immense patience and personal interest in him, you helped Thomas your disciple to transform himself from a "doubting Thomas" to a "deifying Thomas". His hurt feelings, his unbelief, and his childlike or childish intransigence, you took it all in good stride. You pampered him by agreeing to his whims and wishes. You called him out and invited him to go ahead with his demand to touch your wounds. As a result, his doubts disappeared. They just melted away in the warmth of your unconditional love. He didn't even pursue his demands. So spontaneously he spoke: "My Lord and My God!"

My Risen Lord, much more than Thomas, many times in my life I have been stubborn, insisting and intransigent. But your unlimited patience and your unconditional love have helped me to keep growing, though at a snail pace!

My Risen Lord, I thank you for waiting for me, nearly seventy years! Thank you for offering me your help to begin every day anew to transform my life. I want to be transformed like your Thomas. Along with your Thomas, I want to keep calling out to You: "My Lord and My God!"

Along with your Mary Magdalene I want keep calling out: "Rabboni!" Amen.

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