



Apostles for Today

Prayer and Reflection - December 2014

“Overcome every temptation through the joy of the Gospel” Spiritual Preparation for the General Congress of the Union in July 2015

“I am aware that we need to create spaces where pastoral workers can be helped and healed, “places where faith itself in the crucified and risen Jesus is renewed, where the most profound questions and daily concerns are shared, where deeper discernment about our experiences and life itself is undertaken in the light of the Gospel, for the purpose of directing individual and social decisions towards the good and beautiful”. (Evangelii Gaudium 77)

Pope Francis invites us to create spaces for renewal, in order to motivate and to heal. During our monthly spiritual reflection, I think that it is worthwhile for each one of us to reflect on our own spaces for renewal where we draw the strength and determination for apostolic action, where we are renewed and discern our own path in life, in life in and with the Church for which we are responsible through our baptism. This space for renewal for each one of us is Jesus, who is with us every time we meet in his name. For this reason our General Statutes speaks of being in communion with God in art. 23. *“The members of the Union, in order to deepen and preserve communion with God and with each other in following Jesus Christ as St. Vincent Pallotti did: study, meditate on and share Sacred Scripture as their source of inspiration; make the celebration of the Eucharist the centre of their lives; are assiduous in personal and community prayer; share reciprocally their experiences of life and of faith; live forgiveness and reconciliation as a pathway to permanent conversion”.*

Without doubt, there are many wonderful apostolic activities which we share in the Church and about which we can boast. **Nevertheless, we need to stop and think about the temptations to which we are exposed** (EG 17 b).

We all well remember what beautiful ideals accompanied Saint Vincent Pallotti in his foundation of the Union (cf. OOC IV, pp.17-23), and with sorrow we must admit that the temptations of which Pope Francis speaks in *Evangelii Gaudium* also affect our Union.

The first temptation is an inordinate concern for personal freedom and relaxation, which leads us to see our apostolic work as a mere appendage to our life, as if it were not part of the very identity of those involved in pastoral ministry; which leads to a heightened individualism, a crisis of identity and a cooling of fervour. These are three evils which fuel one another. Also, a lifestyle which leads to an attachment to financial security, or to a desire for power or human glory at all cost, rather than giving their lives to others in mission. In this way, the task of evangelisation is lived without enthusiasm, with only a minimum of effort limited in time.

Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of missionary enthusiasm! (EG 78-80)

Saint Vincent yearned to fulfil the commandment of love which is without limits and desired that all might know and love Christ. For this reason, our love for Jesus cannot remain simply our own private secret, hidden from the eyes of the world, not allowing it to be shared with those who do not know him.

Sometimes we are afraid that someone will invite us to carry out an apostolic action; and thus we try to distance ourselves from every commitment which could deprive us of our free time which we guard obsessively ... as if the task of evangelisation were a danger rather than a joyful response to the love of God which calls us to mission and makes us fully realised and fruitful. The problem is not always an excess of activity, but rather activity undertaken badly, without adequate motivation, without a spirituality which would permeate it and make it pleasurable. Today's obsession with immediate results makes it hard for pastoral workers to tolerate anything that smacks of disagreement, possible failure, criticism, the cross. The biggest threat of all is "the gray pragmatism of the daily life of the Church, in which all appears to proceed normally, while in reality faith is wearing down and degenerating into small-mindedness".

Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of the joy of evangelization! (EG 81-83)

The joy of the Gospel is such that it cannot be taken away from us by anyone or anything (cf. *Jn* 16:22). One of the more serious temptations which stifles boldness and zeal is a defeatism which turns us into querulous and disillusioned pessimists, "sourpusses". Nobody can go off to battle unless he is fully convinced of victory beforehand. In some places a spiritual "desertification" has evidently come about, as the result of attempts by some societies to build without God or to eliminate their Christian roots. We can also become a spiritual desert. Our family or workplace can also be a parched place where faith nonetheless has to be preserved and communicated. In the desert people of faith are needed who, by the example of their own lives, point out the way to the Promised Land and keep hope alive".

Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of hope! (EG 85-86)

Today, when the networks and means of human communication have made unprecedented advances, we sense the challenge of finding and sharing the depths

of a life of communion. We experience being together with our differences, initially perhaps a little chaotically, which however can become a genuine experience of fraternity, a caravan of solidarity, a sacred pilgrimage. To go out of ourselves and to join others is healthy for us. To be self-enclosed is to taste the bitter poison of isolation. The Gospel tells us constantly to run the risk of a face-to-face encounter with others, in a community of faith. The Son of God, by becoming flesh, summoned us to the revolution of tenderness. In some parts of our society, we see the growing attraction to various forms of a “spirituality of well-being” divorced from any community life, or to a “theology of prosperity” detached from responsibility for our brothers and sisters. The solution to our problems will never be found in fleeing from a personal and committed relationship with God which at the same time commits us to serving others. It happens today in our parishes that as believers seek to hide or keep apart from others, or quietly flit from one place to another or from one task to another, without creating deep and stable bonds. This is a false remedy which can cause spiritual sickness. It is far better to learn to find Jesus in the faces of others, in their voices, in their pleas. There indeed we find true healing, since the way to relate to others which truly heals us is a *mystical*, contemplative fraternal love, capable of seeing the sacred grandeur of our neighbour, of finding God in every human being, of tolerating the nuisances of life in common by clinging to the love of God, of opening the heart to divine love and seeking the happiness of others just as their heavenly Father does.

Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of community! (EG 87-92)

We must also beware of spiritual worldliness, which hides behind the appearance of piety and even love for the Church. It consists in seeking not the Lord’s glory but human glory and personal well-being. This leads us to replace evangelical fervour with complacency and self-indulgence. Those who have fallen into this worldliness look on from above and afar, they reject the prophecy of their brothers and sisters, they discredit those who raise questions, they constantly point out the mistakes of others, they neither learn from their sins nor are they genuinely open to forgiveness. This stifling worldliness can only be healed by breathing in the pure air of the Holy Spirit, who frees us from concentration on ourselves and opens us to the presence of God.

Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of the Gospel! (EG 93-97)

Spiritual worldliness leads some Christians to war with other Christians who stand in the way of their quest for power, prestige, pleasure and economic security. Beware of the temptation of jealousy! We are all in the same boat and headed to the same port! Let us ask for the grace to rejoice in the gifts of each, which belong to all. Saint Paul’s exhortation is directed to each of us: “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (*Rom* 12:21). And again: “Let us not grow weary in doing what is right” (*Gal* 6:9).

Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of the ideal of fraternal love! (EG 98-101)

We should recognize that despite the present crisis of commitment and communal relationships, many young people are making common cause before the problems of our world and are taking up various forms of activism and volunteer work. How beautiful it is to see that young people are “street preachers” (*callejeros de la fe*), joyfully bringing Jesus to every street, every town square and every corner of the earth! A lack of contagious apostolic fervour in our communities results in a cooling of enthusiasm and attractiveness. Wherever there is life, fervour and a desire to bring Christ to others, genuine vocations will arise. Challenges exist to be overcome! Let us be realists, but without losing our joy, our boldness and our hope-filled commitment!

Let us not allow ourselves to be robbed of missionary vigour! (EG 106-109)

Conclusion:

Joy is truly a great strength, because it is a sign that the Lord is truly with us. This is why Saint Vincent, speaking of the members of the Union, desired that joy and spiritual happiness would radiate from their faces, in their modest gaze, in all of their activity, behaviour, in the reciprocal encounter in community, and in particular with people coming from outside, encountered in pastoral ministry (cf. OCCC VII, 171).

The Gospel, hope, community, the ideal of fraternal love, the missions ... all of this is a way of being Church. It is for this that we meet together, that we strengthen each other, so that the Union may be always ready to bring Jesus, the joy which is ever new, the joy to be shared...

Questions for personal and/or community reflection:

- How do I nourish my faith and my being in communion with God?
- What temptations do I experience as a cause of paralysis in my apostolate?
- What apostolic initiatives can we take as a National Coordination Council, as Local Coordination Councils, as members of communities and groups of the Union, in order to create a space for encounter with families to help them to discover and/or deepen evangelical joy and hope in their lives?

*Fr. Vladimír Peklanský SAC
Promotore Nazionale della Formazione,
Slovacchia*