

CHAPTER 2010 : SPIRITUALITY (5)

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Thanksgiving

How do we give thanks and praise to God for all his many graces and blessings? What form should our gratitude take – a thanksgiving Eucharist? A few well chosen and appropriate gestures - a few well chosen words? And then no doubt we just get on with our lives as before both as missionaries and as a society – we will go back to the mundane living that we are so used to. But I really wonder if that is the form gratitude should take. Many years ago I was struck by a quotation from Catherine of Sienna which I share with you now – in fact she was replying to someone who had asked her how he could repay God for a great grace he had received. This is what she said:

“It wouldn’t do you any good to do any more penances. It wouldn’t do you much good to build a great Church. It won’t do you much good to add more quiet time to prayer. But I’ll tell you something you can do to really pay God back for the compassion he gives you. Find someone as unlovable as you are and give that person the kind of love God has given you.” Catherine of Sienna

This beautiful text made me reflect a lot on just how we should give thanks and praise to God for the many blessings he has showered upon us. Maybe – just maybe gratitude is not so much about words or even gestures, important though they might be. Gratitude really should be translated into faithfulness; it should be translated by the way we live and gratitude should indeed transform the way we live. There is a higher form of gratitude than merely uttering words – it’s about living something, it is about sharing the transformation that has taken place within our lives; we have been touched and in return we must reach out and touch the lives of others – if this is not the case then our gratitude becomes nothing more than a passing ritual that is devoid of meaning.

We must, as Missionaries of Africa, translate thanksgiving by faithfulness – to our call – to our past – to our founder – to one another and of course above all to the people we humbly serve. So giving thanks must not be seen merely as words or some sort of ritual it is also an act. Gratitude may well be a serious moment of intense prayer to God and that is fine but also our act of thanksgiving should take place in our community, in the market place, in the way we are with the people we serve and more than anything our thanksgiving should be contagious; it should bear witness to all the graces and gifts we have received but at the same time joyfully communicate those graces and gifts to others. Others can only realise what we have received if we share it with them – that is what true thanksgiving is all about; *‘People will believe that we have been cured only if the cure is more contagious than the disease.’*

Thinking about all that made me go back to a text that has stayed with me for years for it helped me understand more on a personal level what my missionary life should be all about. The text has a lot to say about gratitude and how we are to translate our gratitude and thanksgiving as missionaries; the text is from the first letter of St. John;

“What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we looked upon and touched with our hands concerns the Word of life - for the life was made visible; we have seen it and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was made visible to us - what we have seen and heard we proclaim now to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; for our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We are writing this so that our joy may be complete.” 1 John: 1-4

What we have heard; what we have seen, what we touched – we proclaim to you – so that you might have fellowship – that our joy be complete. To bring men and women closer to God and closer to one another and by so doing bring them and ourselves joy. Joy is the essence of Christianity; joy is also the essence of a life lived in thanksgiving; joy should be the tangible effect of our gratitude.

I would like to think that this really is the essence of our mission. In so many ways we complicate things – we missiologise, we theologise, we talk about new ways of doing mission, we talk about our mission spirituality and yet somehow from the very beginning our mission has always been relational just as the mission of Jesus was relational. Our mission is all about the way we relate to God and to all our brothers and sisters – it is all about fellowship; it is a mission born out of thanksgiving for what we ourselves have received; a mission of transformation; a mission of liberation, a mission of bringing peace and reconciliation; a mission of encounter ; a mission that for Jesus was indeed counter cultural and subversive for it was a mission that somehow stood against the self righteous and false piety of the religion of the day – a religion that seemed to be asking the wrong questions and a religion that somehow had become rigid and stifled by its own superficiality.

If, as I believe, our mission is relational, then it is true that what we say is not so important, but what we are. Jesus never used many words but spoke so much more by his way of being; by his reaching out. We know that words will always be empty if they are not accompanied and supported by the very witness of our lives, both individually and as a community. In so many ways more and more today people are tired of sham and hollowness they are looking for something real; they also need to touch, to see and to hear. I think it is Anthony of Padua who said: *‘It is a living word when our actions speak for us. Put an end to words then, I beg you and let your actions speak.’* I would add – *let our gratitude speak.*

Our mission is a ministry towards the people we are called to serve and for most of us that means our small Parish communities, the youth groups, the catechists and for others our specialised ministry, be it in the area of justice and peace or encounter. But we must also remember we are also called to share the life of fellowship with the

confreres with whom will live and work with in community; even in our communities we are called to produce fellowship with our confreres and with God; we must bring them joy and we must set before them Jesus Christ – how? Quite simply by the way we are – by our concern, by our gentleness, by our desire to reach out, to forgive, and to be service.

We could well ask ourselves: What have we heard? What have we seen during these last few weeks? How have we been touched, and just what is it we have looked upon? Regarding our own personal missionary journey we might add on a much more personal note: just how have I been touched, just how have I been entrusted with a mission? Just how have I been graced by his presence? Yes it is personal and has to be personal because, as John rightly says, we can only share with others what we ourselves have seen, what we ourselves have touched, what we ourselves have experienced – and what we have seen, touched and experienced is somehow deep down within us – and as missionaries we have to be able to live out of the depths of such experience. If there has been no experience – then we will have nothing to give. If there has been no experience what do we hope to set before the people we are called to serve? If there is no experience there will be no contagion only perhaps the contagion of our emptiness. Gratitude must spill over into our mission, in the joy that is deep rooted within us, in our being able to share that joy with others. Thanksgiving will be the very leitmotif of all that we do and say as missionaries and we can only pass on to others we ourselves have been given as gift. That being the case:

- If we have no prayer or spiritual life then we cannot expect others to grow spiritually through our help.
- If we do not know what it is to go beyond our comfort zones – we can never expect others to stretch themselves.
- If we content ourselves with the strict minimum in the fulfilling of our responsibilities then our life of self giving will reflect also a minimum of love – and we will follow the law of the least effort.
- If we really don't feel gratitude within us then we have nothing to share with others.

Hopefully the great secret of all our ministry is that Christ is dwelling in us and that we are indeed the beloved. The great secret of ministry is a thankful and grateful heart as a response to such love. Jesus was able to see everything in terms of God's love and thus he was able to see his life and ministry as a gift and blessing from the Father; he was also very appreciative of all those that in some way showed their gratefulness. This comes out very clearly in the account of the woman who washed the feet of Jesus and wiped them with her hair as recounted in Luke 7:36-50. Jesus prefers the extravagance of this woman's wild gesture of gratitude to the absence of any gestures by the host. Also in the gospels there are instances that show how Jesus could be disturbed by the lack of

gratitude and appreciation as seen in the story of the ten lepers and of the unforgiving servant (Mt 18:23-24).

Such ungratefulness can only come from people wrapped up in their own world, caught up in their own self centredness so much so that they are quite incapable of being indebted to anyone else. These are the people who take so much from granted who are enslaved more than anything else by the power of their own ego. According to Gustavo Gutierrez, the liberation theologian, only one kind of person transforms the world spiritually, someone with a grateful heart. As missionaries we must be those who are able to thank the Lord for all that is good; for all that is gift both within ourselves and in others. We don't need cynical, pessimistic and impossible to please missionaries that can only see the negative in all that surrounds them we need men and women who are happy and grateful for all that they have received and that is why in return they desire to offer those gifts to others.

One of worst temptations we might face in the spiritual life is the quiet seduction of self-centred isolation – that indeed we don't need anyone; we are indebted only to ourselves. It will always be a temptation for all of us to retreat into the warmth of our cosy cocoon, or finding a haven of uninvolved serenity. Yet life is an insistent and ongoing demand to move outside of ourselves, to move beyond ourselves. Gratitude and thankfulness will help us to do just that; gratitude becomes a way of life, a way of being and it is genuine then it will be contagious. Gratitude then should be the hallmark of our mission and ministry. I believe the Lord is saying to each one of us today:

You have received so much from me. You have known my forgiveness, my healing, and my compassion. You have known what it is to be held in the Father's embrace. I don't really need your words of praise, I don't really need your prostrations I just want you to be me in this world of ours, to be my voice for those who have no voice of their own. To dare go where no one dares to venture – to be my peace where there is hatred and strife; to be my faith where there is doubt; my hope where there is despair; my light where there is darkness; my joy where there is sadness. Your gratitude will be your reaching out; it will be your tireless efforts to bring about reconciliation; it will be your desire to live every more fully your community life; to share more of the joy that inhabits your soul. You are thankful and full of gratitude then I invite you to lose yourself in this marvellous mystery of love, of giving of oneself, of service: only such love can open wide the gates of the Kingdom. And it is such love that will constantly remind us that in each person, whatever his colour or religion, whatever his beauty or none there lies a hidden treasure - the very kingdom of God.

We can never really market the way we live our Missionary life or the way we live our community life – such a life can only be witnessed too. When we are tempted to settle for the narrowness of our comforts and our own way of seeing things let us remember that gratitude for all that we have received is always a call for something much bigger, much nobler, much harder, much more empowering. Such going beyond ourselves in love both redeems and brings new life – that is what the world needs that is what our communities need. Our mission flows from gratitude and if we are truly grateful then we will know it because we can never be the same. To end this rather short conference I

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just propose that we keep in mind Psalm 40. This is a psalm of gratitude and also the desire to proclaim such gratitude to others – a missionary psalm also asking for help and protection - very fitting for all of us who desire to be vibrant witnesses of the kingdom.

“I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation; see, I have not restrained my lips, as you know, O LORD. I have not hidden your saving help within my heart, I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation; I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness from the great congregation. Do not, O LORD, withhold your mercy from me; let your steadfast love and your faithfulness keep me safe forever.”