

CHAPTER OPENING MASS: 10th May 2010

Homily of the Superior General

- ❖ 1st Reading in English : Acts 16:11-15
- ❖ Evangile: Luc 1, 39-56 (Gospel: Luke 1:39-56)

The meeting between Mary and Elizabeth places us at the core of missionary spirituality because the meeting between the two mothers is in fact also between the two children whose mission the mothers both serve. John the Baptist, of whom the angel announced to Zachary that 'Even from his mother's womb he will be filled with the Holy Spirit', (1:15) inaugurates his mission, pointing out the Messiah by way of his mother's words. Every meeting we have confirms us in our specific mission. We too bear in our hearts the Word of God and the Spirit of the Lord is at work in us.

Some years before he died, Christian de Chergé, one of the seven Trappist monks murdered in Algeria in 1996, shared a beautiful meditation on the Visitation with the Little Sisters of Jesus in Morocco. He spoke to them of the secret Mary bore within her, a secret that was also God's secret. Would she reveal this secret to her cousin? What could she say about it? Moreover, how would she tell it - or would she remain silent? Mary knew that her cousin Elizabeth was pregnant, but she did not know of the bond between the two infants. Mary came to Elizabeth's home to help her and be of service. It was her sole intention. However, lo and behold, on her arrival, at their first meeting on the doorstep, Mary has only just greeted her cousin when Elizabeth started the conversation by 'giving a loud cry'. This cry is a proclamation of the Good News, such a beautiful cry of joy and faith from Zechariah's wife: 'blessed is she who believed'.

Let us pause for a moment on this first meeting. Elizabeth declared, 'For the moment your greeting reached my ears, the child in my womb leapt for joy.' We know the importance of greeting rituals in Africa. They are often long and musical, as among the Dogon in Mali and doubtless in other languages too. They are veritable morning community litanies, establishing links between persons that the night separated. Greeting, simply saying hello, is how mission begins. Peace be with you, salaam. This we can all learn and say. The impact of a greeting can reach very far. Mary's greeting penetrated Elisabeth's womb; her whole being, as well as her baby, felt the vibration. In addition, in Luke's account, everything is interlinked. As Christian de Chergé put it so well, 'Elizabeth released Mary's Magnificat and this Magnificat became the Church's first Eucharist.' This Magnificat is a thanksgiving psalm that sings of Mary's personal gratitude. This Visitation is a mission path: meeting, proclamation, thanksgiving. Everything is there.

What does the Visitation tell us of our spirituality and our mission?

In the first place, that it is important to create around ourselves a climate of mutuality. Mary and Elizabeth did not belong to the same age group. It is the same for us. We also come from different horizons by our culture and education. The gap can be even wider when faced with the people to whom we are sent. Nevertheless, we know, because we have experienced it, that it is possible to overcome certain of these obstacles by beginning to learn their language and traditions. Openness to others creates this bond of mutuality. Let us pray that this Chapter will be a quality experience of mutuality among us.

Paradoxically, this relationship to the other person different from us can only be formed with our own keen awareness of what we are, of our own identity. This is experienced in a particular way by those who are involved in interreligious dialogue. Remaining faithful to oneself and to one's convictions is a condition of genuine encounter. We are called to the crucible of communion and not of melding into oneness. This communion, enabling me to acknowledge the other person as someone to be highly regarded, invites us all to cultivate respect for every individual person, always and everywhere.

Another aspect of this missionary spirituality which arises from this meeting between Mary and Elizabeth is the importance of learning how to speak, how to converse, with God. Prayer is both spoken word and physical body, it is an outward cry and an inner vibration; it is a joy in the present and a rereading of the past. It is trust in the future and is rooted in our history and in the history of those men and women who welcome us in our places of mission. The Magnificat invites us to develop a culture of heartfelt gratitude and a culture of gratuitousness in our lives, for God's 'mercy reaches from age to age for those who fear him.' It also invites us to learn to reveal ourselves to God in prayer in thanksgiving and to disclose this art, passing it on around us. I believe that our mission today will be more authentic and complete the more we learn how to integrate this purely spiritual dimension.

We have all had Visitation experiences in our lives either in approaching others or by being welcomed by others. These experiences have perhaps been points of departure. Then, like Mary, we said to ourselves, 'Yes, from now on', something new has been created and something is going to change my life. How happy are those who live from these points of reference and happier still those who know how to share them with others. Let us take the example of the Acts of the Apostles and of Lydia whom Luke tells us, 'She listened to us, and the Lord opened her heart to accept what Paul was saying.'

During these five weeks, let us ask the Lord to give us the grace of listening to one another and of sharing in truth.