

Whose side are we on?

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From 22 - 24 February 2019, sisters and brothers (from Spain and France) who are in Initial Formation, met for their annual meeting in San Lorenzo de El Escorial.

A few days ago in El Escorial, Patricia Villarroel, ssc, the Superior General of the sisters and I entered into a dialogue with the brothers and sisters of Spain and France who are in Initial Formation. There we shared on how important it is to walk together as sisters, brothers and lay people. But this is not enough. Included among the desires expressed by our younger brothers and sisters was that our communities would have a simple lifestyle and be closer to the poor.

In fact, Jesus gives a clear direction to those who want to follow him. We are to go towards the crowds that follow him unceasingly, to the poor and the sick who come to meet him, to those who shout from the edge of the road whom others want to silence. For Jesus, to accept his call to follow him is to become a neighbour to men and women, especially to those who are suffering, and to enter into the intimacy of his God whom we can call "Our Father". And so that those who approach Jesus - his disciples and his adversaries - do not forget the direction of the path they are called to follow, Jesus asks them point-blank questions the answers of which involve a definition and the way forward: "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" (Mt. 12:48). "Why are you afraid, you of little faith?" (Mt. 8:26). "By whom do your own people expel demons?" (Lk. 11:19). "Who is the greatest: the one seated at the table or the one who serves?" (Lk. 22:27). "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good instead of evil, to save a life rather than destroy it?" (Mk. 3:4).

Following Jesus and responding to his ongoing calls that come from our brothers, from the pastoral or social realities that we are engaged in, from the journey that the Church is undertaking, means taking a stand and redefining the direction we are moving in. Following Jesus means wanting to be close to the people with whom we journey in such a way that their joys, questions, longings, pains or indignations become our own.

Two challenges

I pause here to consider two recent events that can help us to get our bearings and put ourselves on the side of what mattered to Jesus and his disciples.

Echoing the voice of the young people, the last Synod of Bishops on *Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment* (Rome, 3-28 October, 2018) endorsed a longing that affects the whole of the Church in its journey: there is a "need for the Church courageously to side with them (excluded, or discarded) and to help build alternatives that eliminate exclusion and marginalization, while strengthening acceptance, accompaniment and integration." (12).

There is here a call that raises questions for each one of us in our given reality. Where are the poor and marginalized? Where do I find them and how do I get close to them? What initiatives are taking place that seek to eliminate exclusion and reinforce integration? How can I collaborate or network with them? The answers to these questions will reveal both the direction in which we are moving and the credibility of the Gospel that we live and we announce to young people.

The second challenge comes from the victims of abuses in the Church. In the recent meeting on the *Protection of Minors in the Church* (Rome, from 21-24 February, 2019) the Mexican journalist and Vaticanist Valentina Alazakri addressed the participants - presidents of Episcopal Conferences and Superiors of male and female congregations - with questions that are awaiting practical and credible answers from us all:

"In facing criminal conduct such as the abuse of minors, do you think that to be true to herself, an institution like the Church can have another way if not that of reporting this crime? That she can have another way if not that of being on the side of the victim and not that of the oppressor? Who is the weakest, most vulnerable child? The priest who abused, the bishop who abused and covered up, or the victim? ... Ask yourselves: are you enemies, as determined as we are, of those who commit abuse or who cover them up? We have decided which side to be on. Have you done so truly, or in word alone?"

Before their arrival, the participants of this "summit" had been asked to dedicate themselves to welcoming and listening to the victims. It is by making an effort to be close and empathetic, by placing oneself at the side of the victims or the most vulnerable, by putting faces and names on them, and having them before you, that one discovers one's own impotence in the face of their pain and mistreatment. This experience leads to an awareness that things have to change. The longed-for change of ways of being and serving in the Church is to accept these questions, make them our own and give them a personal and institutional response.

Reparative love

This month in which we celebrate the Good Father, his birth and death, is a good time for us to let resound in us his first words, less known perhaps, in which he expresses his vision of the Congregation. In one of his writings, addressed to the Bishop of Poitiers and requesting Diocesan Approval of the Congregation, he describes his mission: "A double association under the title of zealots of the love of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary ... forever useful to those members of Jesus Christ who are suffering and are persecuted". (Petition to the Bishop of Poitiers, 22nd May, 1802).

The reparative mission of the members of the congregation is our response to an ardour and a zeal for the work of God, by making our own the feelings of the heart of Jesus and of Mary's heart. And it is also to walk together as brothers and sisters in the Body of Christ, placing ourselves resolutely on the side of those members who suffer and are persecuted.

In our local community, in our pastoral service we have to let the questions that come to us from Jesus and from the young people and from victims of child abuse resonate with us: Whose side are we on? For whom are we spending our lives? In our response, Jesus is waiting for us.

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