

Surprised by God

Alberto Toutin ssc
Superior General

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Polyptych Jesus, The Good News,
(detail, *Pentecost*),
by Claudio di Girolamo,
Faculty of Theology,
Catholic University of Chile
(Santiago)

In many places of the Congregation great work has been undertaken in retreats, assemblies, chapters, community meetings, etc., on the Chapter Document "Our inner self is being renewed day by day". The interest in this document expresses a deep and common sentiment among the brothers. It gives voice to a profound spiritual movement that touches the hearts of all and leads us to a central aspect of our Christian and Sacred Hearts religious life. When we speak of the "inner self," we speak about the Lord Jesus living and acting in each one of us, through his Spirit. We need to revisit, to savour again this conviction of faith in the concrete situations of our lives and mission. It is the Lord Jesus who continues to meet us, and by means of his presence, his word, his gestures and the confidence he places in us as his disciples, we take him with us wherever we go, our hearts burning.

The Lord of surprising initiatives

In these times we perceive on the one hand worrying signs regarding the care of our common home, the fragility of institutions and the weakening of social bonds. On the other hand, and more specifically, our Church is going through a crisis of credibility in many places due to the abuses of power, conscience and sex, aggravated by a culture of silence regarding abusers and a lack of empathy towards the abused. All this situates in a very concrete way the desire for renewal of our "inner self" and opens us to rediscover spiritual resources that can help us go through this time with lucidity and confidence.

To assist him with one of his mission assignments (Lk 10: 1-12), Jesus appears with authority and appoints 'seventy-two others'. It is a 'sending' that arises out of Jesus' travels during which he actualised and preached the nearness of the kingdom of God and at the same time perceived how people can be either attracted to or resistant to his person and his message. I would like to emphasise just three characteristics of this sending, which may serve as a framework for the actions of those sent.

The first characteristic is that Jesus sends them out two by two. From an efficiency point of view one might ask: Why not send each one of them to different areas? In this way one could "optimise" the use of personnel and cover a larger area. However, this small

community is in itself a sign of the Good News being proclaimed. No one person can claim to embrace the fact that God is already reigning in our midst. Such recognition requires the watchful eyes and attentive hearts of many. Moreover, in the journeying together they can verify among themselves not only the different views of the message of Jesus, but also the impact and the transformation that the message produces in themselves. Much more important than words, will be the testimony that the two give when, sent by Jesus, they walk together, carrying his Gospel.

A second characteristic is this: He sends them out "ahead of him" to all the villages and places "where Jesus was going." The status of these envoys is none other than to be precursors of Jesus: the person of Jesus, and his message are at the centre, not those sent. This status reminds the disciples that everything they do or say is a reference to Jesus, it is Jesus that they are called to reveal in their lives. By sending the others ahead as precursors, Jesus shares with them his own mission, gives them confidence and incorporates them into his own status, the status of one who has been sent by the Father. Finally, to be precursors reminds the disciples of the need to be internally connected and familiar with Jesus, with his lifestyle, with his way of living and meeting people, as they witnessed for themselves on the roads of Galilee.

The third characteristic has to do with the horizon. "The harvest is plentiful" and this harvest belongs neither to Jesus nor to those whom he sends but to the "Lord of the harvest". Jesus then refers this sending to the action of God his Father who precedes him and of whom Jesus himself is a witness: he sees how the Father disposes the little ones to receive with simple hearts the gift of the kingdom; he weeps before Jerusalem because they did not want to accept the message of peace from God; he lets himself be "evangelized" by the great faith of those who do not belong to Israel, by those "from outside", by those who do not "come to the temple". It is curious how often in the days for promoting religious and priestly vocations we use this phrase of Jesus, all the time insisting that the workers are few and asking God to raise more religious and priestly vocations, while ignoring the fact that the harvest is abundant. It is true that Jesus warns his disciples about the difficulties they will encounter in proclaiming the Good News, the resistance, even the inhospitality. But the outlook that he encourages them to have as they live through these difficulties is that the harvest is abundant, the fruit is already ripe and it is time now to welcome, recognize and collect it. If God does not produce as many religious and priestly vocations as we would expect, it is perhaps because the fruits that he is offering cannot be left locked into our calculations and aspirations. At the same time, perhaps the Lord is inviting us to leave the roads already travelled so that we may be surprised by his initiatives that are to be found in the great wealth of gifts and ministries among the faithful, or in concrete services for the poor and needy undertaken by those, who, without knowing it, do it to Jesus himself, or by those who hearing the groans of creation waiting to be released, take care of it, simply because it is our common home.

Jesus through his Spirit, protagonist of the Church

The nascent Church described in the Acts of the Apostles is, above all, the church of the apostles, of the disciples, of men and women who knew and lived in the confidence that God leads his Church through the Spirit of Jesus. It is only those who have an attentive heart and feet well placed on the ground who can perceive this divine initiative in the tensions, needs and urgencies of the men and women they encountered. In these encounters, new and more rich interpretations of the death and resurrection of Jesus were emerging, ministers that the communities needed were recognized, communities were provided with the basic structures needed so that the message of Jesus and his resurrected presence would remain as a path open to all. This openness to God's initiative in building his Church was a way of confessing the abundance of the harvest and a witnessing to God remaining the Lord of his harvest. In such a horizon, bold collaborators emerge, such as Peter, Paul, Stephen, Nicholas, Priscilla, Cornelius, Damaris and many others. We hear how

Paul himself, having experienced the difficulties of announcing that Jesus is the Christ to the Jews of Corinth, decided to withdraw from there and go to another place, perhaps to a group more receptive to his message. In these difficult circumstances, Paul had a vision that reminded him that he was a co-worker of the Lord Jesus through his Spirit and that all his intelligence and apostolic zeal must be placed at the service of supporting this initiative of the Lord: "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city." (Acts 18: 9b-10). Amid the difficulties in proclaiming Jesus' announcement, Paul's confidence is renewed and he is reminded that it is the Lord who precedes him in the hearts of the people of this city. With this new certainty that the Lord is leading his Church, Paul changes his disposition and converts to the "Lord of the harvest", deciding to place himself once more at his service. Instead of leaving Corinth, dusting off and recognising it as a failure, "Paul remained there for a year and six months, teaching the Word of God among them" (Acts 18: 11).

It is this confession of faith in the "Lord of the harvest" that sustains the missionary activity of the Church in the little-known decree of the Second Vatican Council, "*Ad gentes*". In a paragraph dedicated to Evangelization and conversion, the Council's fathers affirm in a beautiful expression: "Wherever God opens a door of speech for proclaiming the mystery of Christ there is announced to all people with confidence and constancy the living God, and He Whom He has sent for the salvation of all, Jesus Christ". (*Ad gentes* 13). It is God who takes the initiative, it is God who is the protagonist of evangelization and who, through the Holy Spirit, disposes hearts to listen to his Word.

How is the health of our inner self?

To enter into a dynamic of renewal of our "inner self", of Jesus living in and acting through us, we could do well to return and reread this decree. An indication of the good health of our "inner self" is that we become more sensitive and alert to the "Lord of the harvest" guiding his Church. The harvest is plenty and is waiting first and foremost for witnesses who can welcome it, gratefully, with new eyes and hearts. Part of the pastoral and missionary conversion of the Church involves confessing in faith and supporting in action the Lord who continues to build his Church on untrodden paths, in collaboration with men and women endowed with a rich diversity of gifts and ministries. A church in service of the Gospel that will be both institutional and transparent in form. Regarding our apostolic works and our religious communities might not our way of seeing change if we were to first ask ourselves what is God already doing and offering us as the fruit of his abundant harvest? May we be surprised by the "Lord of the harvest" whose abundant harvest is waiting for us.

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