

Lessons from a manger: Pastors are part of the people of God

*Alberto Toutin ssc
Superior General*

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"Pastors" of the Cathedral in Verona (Italy)

We are approaching Christmas when we celebrate God becoming flesh and living in the midst of His People. This grammar of divine love, a love that is close and empathetic, a love that shares from within the hopes and contradictions of men and women, that makes human concerns its own, that lets itself be affected by human behaviour and choices, is more timely than ever in its political and institutional outreach. In many places, we see manifestations of violence and outrage at the absence of effective public policies that favour the most disadvantaged in health, work, education. The growing inequality between a very small sector of our societies and the vast sector that does not even have what is needed to live is outrageous. Political leaders' speeches sound increasingly distant from the real concerns of ordinary people who work miracles to survive to the end of the month. In this picture that everyone can tailor according to the reality of their country, I wonder personally and as a congregation: How sensitive are we to this reality? It is undoubtedly important to be well informed and alert about these situations. But how much does such information affect us in the way we live, day by day? What real contact, with a name and a place, do I have with those who are living in situations of poverty and marginalisation?

In this time of Advent when we are preparing to celebrate Christmas, it is good for us to direct our hearts and our gaze to the school that is the manger, to be at the feet of Jesus where we can learn from Him, learn from the grammar of closeness and empathy that is lived with the coherence of divine love, where deeds confirm the words.

Our vocation is to become a people (Luke 6: 12-19)

True to his divine DNA of proximity and closeness, Jesus matures his decisions in a prayerful dialogue with God. The night is the privileged time to be in silence, alone, without masks, without many words, with your Father. Following the logic of the incarnation, Jesus becomes flesh, becomes a people. And to make visible this new people that he wants to inhabit and form, he chooses the twelve. This choice is made from among the disciples who follow Jesus wherever he goes. And without delay, Jesus begins to form this group so that they might discover the meaning of their being chosen. Jesus comes down from the mountain with the newly elected and goes first to meet the great multitude of the disciples - so that the twelve do not forget where they have come from and remember that discipleship is to be the fundamental condition among them and with Jesus, the only Teacher. And then, Jesus puts the disciples in direct contact with "the great crowd of people" who have come from different parts and who are made up of the sick and possessed. In that close relationship of the disciples with the crowd, the disciples (and the twelve in their midst) learn the simple grammar of the believing people: they have come to meet Jesus, to hear him, to touch him and thus be healed. This is a masterly pastoral lesson of Jesus for his 'elect'. He does not give them time to boast of his choosing them. Quite the opposite. In his way of acting and going out to meet the crowds, Jesus tells the twelve that the meaning of their election is that they are and will remain disciples. Their vocation is not a privilege, but implies a call to become, like Jesus, close, empathic, compassionate and attentive to this suffering crowd. As disciples and pastors, they are always called to be schooled in the simple faith of that crowd, a faith that expresses itself in an incarnate piety and not merely theoretical, and to make their own desire to listen to and touch Jesus. The good health of the people whom Jesus wants to form depends on the twelve following Jesus as his disciples and walking with the crowds.

Shepherds close to the flock (Luke 2:8-20)

The shepherds are sleeping outdoors and watching their flock at night. Shepherds and sheep are outdoors, sharing the same living conditions. The care of the flock and the livelihood of the shepherd depend on this closeness. Due to the requirements of this work they cannot frequent the temple as prescribed by law. They are marginal to the life of the city and also to the life of the temple. However, it is they to whom the angel of the Lord first announces the incarnation of the Son of God, God-with-us. Even the way this news is communicated tells you who this Lord is. "Today a Saviour is born for you, who is the Lord Christ". This is not simply an apparition, but a relationship of God-with-them, God "for them", in the "here and now", in our time. He will be a joy for all the people. He is also a joy for these shepherds, who though part of the people, are not seen much in the temple or in the life of the city. They are called to discover the joy of God's closeness, though not alone but with the people to whom they belong. And to recognize the Saviour the only clue they receive is that of a child wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. Nothing extraordinary apparently. But they know, from the experience of closeness with their flock, that life is a gift, a constant miracle, great and precarious at the same time. This child is not one more child-birth statistic. He is the Christ and Lord, the one long awaited who, in a fragile state, has come close, taking on flesh amidst a people who will teach him how to be human and whose joy he will be.

For those who are not used to receiving such good news, the news must be verified and shared. Thus, the shepherds become announcers and witnesses to Mary, Joseph and the child, witnesses to the incredible news that God is in their midst, in this child full of promise and fragility. Mary, Joseph and Jesus himself would come to discover with the people the joy that God wants to bring about through them.

Carrying out God's work as zealots

Christmas night also reminds us of the foundation of our Congregation. Shortly before midnight, our Founders took their religious vows. They made their profession in loving coherence with the mystery of God-with-us. They pronounced their vows of poverty, obedience and chastity, in the light of the Holy Spirit, and in service of the good of the Work [of God] as zealots of the love of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. The centre is God and his works to whom, by the action of the Holy Spirit, the Founders make themselves not only available but also desirous to collaborate with God as zealots. The ardour that moves them comes from the love of God contemplated in the hearts of Jesus and Mary. And then the Founder blessed the white mantle as a sign of their dedication and devotion to Mary. Through this profession the Founders allowed the Christmas event to become present in their lives. The love of God manifested in the attitudes, intelligence, loving and compassionate closeness of the hearts of Jesus and Mary became incarnate in them, in their religious family and in this community. In order that this mission would never be forgotten, Father Pierre, as he was then known, took on the name Marie-Joseph. Like Joseph, he became a caretaker, a lover and available for a work that did not belong to the Founders, but rather belonged to God, just as children are entrusted to their parents. Like Mary, he felt called to give himself without rest, night and day to the care, accompaniment and growth of the small family of the congregation, called to repair the social and ecclesial fabric of its time.

The white mantle, a sign for the zealots of Marian love in the Church, takes on new dimensions when we listen to the cry of the poor and of the earth and let ourselves be touched by this pain. This is what the bishops, missionaries, lay people and representatives of the indigenous peoples gathered at the Pan-Amazon Synod (Rome, October 6-27, 2019) exhort us to. We are called to be an "Amazonian, Samaritan Church", "that goes out to meet everyone, especially indigenous peoples, the poor, those excluded from society and others... A Marian Church that raises children in the faith and educates them with affection and patience, always open to learning from the richness of the peoples" (*Amazonia, new ways for the Church and for an integral ecology. Final document, no. 22*).

Contemplating in wonder and confidence the love of God incarnate in Jesus, whose heart teaches us to love, may the prayer that Pope Francis proposed to the religious, seminarians and catechists in Thailand, during his recent visit find resonance in us: "To those called to apostolic fruitfulness, called to struggle valiantly for the things that the Lord loves and for which he gave his life, let us ask for the grace for our hearts to beat in unison with his own. I would even ask you to be wounded by that same love; to have that same passion for Jesus and for his kingdom." (*Meeting with priests, religious, seminarians and catechists, St. Peter's Parish, Bangkok, Friday, 22 November 2019*).

Wishing you all a blessed Advent,

Fraternally in the SSCC,

Alberto Toutin ssc
Superior General