

The secret of two... is God's

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Wind storm in Quito (Ecuador)

We are approaching the feast day (*dies natalis*) of the Good Father. To speak of the Good Father invariably implies speaking also of the Good Mother. Their destiny was united in service of the Congregation that they founded and accompanied. This is a time to revive in us - SSCC brothers, sisters and lay - the spiritual dynamics that guided their life. At a time when we are looking to renew our ways of being and serving in the Church, our being open and willing to engage these spiritual dynamics could prove to be an encouraging and challenging resource for us.

The Secret

In her *Memoirs of the Congregation*, Gabriel de la Barre recorded the history of our religious family up to 1823. Here is the portrait she offers of the Congregation:

"In general, a remark that can and always could be made of the Congregation is that the means available were constantly below the ends proposed. Thus there were acquisitions to be made and no money for purchases, many children and young people to instruct and very few teachers. Among the Sisters, it was the same. Illnesses added to the difficulties, yet perpetual adoration was never interrupted. God wished to do all; God did all. The members of the Congregation who are still alive and who have been involved or witnesses to all of this, will have great difficulty in saying how they were able to do what they did. God guards his secret. (Gabriel de la Barre, *Mémoire de Sœur Gabriel de la Barre, Notes sur la Congrégation des Sacrés Cœurs, Premier Cahier* (18 octobre 1823) in *Écrits* (1802-1829), p. 91)

Gabriel de la Barre draws our attention first to the reality of a disproportion that existed between means and ends that would form part of our SSCC apostolic style: having very high objectives or goals with little means available. In spite of this precariousness of

means, resources and persons, there was no lowering of the objectives or goals. This was not seen as an obstacle to carrying out the most diverse activities: free classes for poor children, formation of seminarians, availability for parish missions in France or the missions in the Sandwich Islands or in the United States or the ensuring of perpetual adoration, etc. Thanks to Gabriel de la Barre we see how it was above all God who carried out his work through the precarious conditions of the Congregation. It is this observation of fact, read in faith, that became a spiritual resource and a theological conviction that inspired and encouraged the Founders: The Congregation is first and foremost the work of God. This conviction enabled them to look with confident realism at the difficulties they encountered on the way and at the institutional precariousness that accompanied them. The more difficulties they encountered, the more they placed their lives and their projects in God's hands. It is God who makes the commitments and projects fruitful.

Thus the Good Mother's exhortation to ensure that there were free classes for the poor children in the houses of the Congregation, because she saw this as a form of *blessing of the houses*. The Good Father spoke of the strength of the Good Mother in spite of her health problems, and her capacity to animate and organise the life of the communities in spite of the lack of means, as a kind of *constant miracle*.

I would like to propose some elements to help us delve into this secret source of pastoral audacity and generosity that marked the Founders' lives of service - a source from which they drank and which today they offer us to drink.

The love of the Cross and trust in God's Providence

In the Good Mother we see her participation in the Cross of Christ as a spiritual constant. This spiritual desire is the fruit of her contemplation of the Cross as a sign of the total gift of love for all. In her letters she places great emphasis on entering into the wounds of Christ. It is there that we are invited to drink from the wellsprings of his own self-giving; by approaching the furnace that is the wounded Heart of Jesus we are encouraged to renew the lukewarmness of our spiritual ardor or zeal. The Good Mother neither understood nor lived her love in any way other than what she learned at the foot of the cross of Jesus. For her, Eucharistic adoration was a memorial of this self-giving, and it was there that she shared in the sufferings of her sisters and brothers, asking the Lord himself to give her the strength to bear all. The immensity of Jesus' love on the Cross is so great that the Good Mother goes so far as to say that it is not she who carries the Cross, but rather it is carried by Love. At the foot of the Cross the Good Mother finds the providential love of God the Father who does not abandon his Son, Jesus or those who, like him, carry their crosses every day:

"We are all in a critical state. We must then pray more fervently than ever and abandon ourselves to Providence. Only the love of the cross can and must sustain us, for we must not disguise the fact that we will have to suffer much. We must take refuge in the Heart of Jesus, cling to it so as never to leave it" (Hilarion Lucas, *Vie de la T. R. Mère Henriette Aymer de la Chevalerie*, 1847. Tome II, La Bonne Mère. Son Esprit, Polycopie Picpus p. 65).

The Good Father's way of participating in the sentiments of Jesus that led him to give himself up on the Cross was mediated by what he saw in the Church: Christian communities were without pastors, the ecclesial institutions in charge of education had been dismantled, the ecclesial fabric was torn apart by internal divisions and by external persecution. When echoes of this social and ecclesial landscape reached him, his shepherd's heart was moved. He came to believe that he was the last living priest in France. The pain that he felt at the situation of the Church made him come out of his hiding place. He experienced with mobilising certainty that the purpose of the priesthood he had received was to give his life like Jesus, helped also by his own trust in the providential love of God the Father, who does not abandon his children. "For I became a priest with the intention of suffering everything, of sacrificing myself for the Good Lord and, if necessary, to die in his service. However, I always had a certain feeling that I would be saved".

To take part in the sufferings of the Church is simply to love as the Lord Jesus loved - giving his life for his own. This conviction had been with him since his formation as a seminarian: "It is not enough to suffer with Jesus Christ (like the evildoer who was crucified at his side); we must suffer for Jesus Christ, we must suffer like Jesus Christ". (*Sermon on the beatitude of those who suffer*, 1790). As Founder he constantly invited his brothers and sisters to live this love according to the Heart of Jesus, that is, a love that consisted in associating themselves with the Cross of Jesus, all the time helping to carry the cross of one another. This is what the Good Father wrote to Father Philibert Vidon on 29 January, 1823: "I assure you, my good friend, that if I could bundle your sorrows together with all the sorrows on the cross that has fallen to me, I would gladly join them - but I beg you to help me carry it. For I count on you as much as on myself to help me unto death". (LEBP 815)

Moreover, the certainty about the providential love of God that the Good Father felt when he left the granary became, with the passing of the years, a key to a theological reading of the history of the Congregation which had been marked by vicissitudes and conflicts. At the time, that same certainty became one of his greatest spiritual assets. This is what the Good Father communicated to his brothers and sisters when he announced the approval of the Congregation by the Holy See:

"The Lord has not ceased to bestow on us the miracles of his Providential care. He has led us by the hand. Each day we have known the proof of his all-powerful protection. We have been preserved during the Reign of Terror. (Circular Letter of the Good Father announcing the approval of the Congregation, April 14, 1817).

Called to love

Another spiritual element that our Founders lived and which they promoted among the members of the Congregation is the vocation to love. Those who consecrate themselves to the love of the Sacred Hearts no longer live for themselves, they live so that the crucified love of Jesus and the tender love of Mary may become flesh in them. Once again we find the disproportion between this end and the precariousness of the means. The founders stressed again and again that the brothers and sisters should not be discouraged by tenacious personal limitations, nor by tensions in the communities, not even by the lack of means or by obstacles that may appear along the way. None of this can prevent the love of Jesus and Mary from being shared and offered, even at the risk of this love not being accepted and reciprocated. It is the logic of the Cross that leads to love in this way, without fear and with generosity.

"Immerse yourself forever in the painful and loving wound of the Divine Heart of Jesus, and you will be sheltered from all storms," wrote the Good Mother. Love more and you will fear less" (Letter to Sister Agnès Crouzet 1804-1805, LEBM 215).

For his part, the Good Father, faced with adversity or personal disappointment, encouraged the community to be rooted in God, as the only source of love and happiness. Thus he wrote to the sisters and brothers of Le Mans:

"Tell everyone; tell even my brother and his friends. I feel it in myself. Everything is nothing, except loving God. So let us live for him alone, and die to please him. This is true happiness" (Letter of the Good Father to the Sisters of Le Mans, July 8, 1828, LEBP 1386).

The shared secret

The source for clarity when looking at the present and when thinking about the pastoral audacity of the Founders is to see in everything the providential hand of God: in the institutional precariousness, in the calls of the Church, in personal desolation and in the demands of a new obedience.

Our Founders nourished their strong, generous and selfless way of loving by contemplating the self-giving of Jesus on the Cross and adoring Him in the Eucharist.

What impact might there be on our apostolic discernment if we saw God's providential love as the key to reading our history and considering our personal and institutional resources?

Would it not be good for us to ask ourselves about the quality of our fraternal life - are we loving our brothers and sisters more concretely every day? Are we helping each other to carry our crosses?

Let us dare to drink from the secret source from which our Founders drank.

Fraternally,

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