

# Ismael

---

Javier Álvarez-Ossorio  
Superior General

INFO SSCC Brothers No 122 – March 5, 2018



Felix Supranto SSCC with a group of Muslim young girls  
Yakarta – Indonesia

Are you familiar with the story of Ishmael? He was Abraham's first-born son. His mother was Hagar, the Egyptian slave. Sarah was sterile and so she gave her servant to her husband to give him offspring (cf. Gen. 16). The two women never got along. Later, Isaac was born, the son of Abraham and Sarah, fruit of God's promise (Gen. 17:19). Then, Sarah, wanting to protect her son's inheritance, demanded that Abraham send Hagar and Ishmael away. "Abraham was greatly distressed because it concerned a son of his" (Gen. 21:11), but he did as Sarah said.

Hagar went off with Ishmael to the desert. There their water ran out. So she "went and sat down opposite him, about a bowshot away; for she said to herself, "I cannot watch the child die. As she sat opposite him, she wept aloud." (Gen. 21:16)

## **A perverse choice (brothers pitted against one another)**

The bible has loads of stories of brother against brother. Surprisingly enough, the origin of their antagonism is found in God's choice. "The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry and dejected." (Gen. 4:4-5) Something similar happened with Esau, whose blessing was

stolen by his brother Jacob, who resorted to a trick suggested by his mother. It's pitiful to hear the Esau's anguished lament to his father Isaac after Jacob's lie, " 'Have you only one blessing, father? Bless me too, father!' and Esau wept aloud." (Gen 27:36-38)

God's blessing, which in principle is meant for everyone, is perverted when it creates a sense of superiority in the one chosen, thereby excluding the brother not chosen. Isaac is the son of the promise, and so Ishmael has to be cast out into the desert. How many people today still cry out and suffer like Hagar, like Esau and like Ishmael!

Throughout the Old Testament, the election of Israel would be used as an argument to justify the violent occupation of the land of Canaan, the extermination of its ancient population, the rejection of foreigners and the exclusion of unbelievers.

Saint Paul, in the Epistle to the Galatians (4:21-31) would speak of Hagar and Sarah as an allegory of a new Christian superiority. "We are children not of the slave woman but of the freeborn woman." (Gal. 4:31) OK but...

## **Jesus, as Ishmael**

Jesus places himself in direct opposition to this biblical sense of perverse election. Jesus comes in Ishmael's place not in Isaac's. For Jesus, there is no room in the inn. He will be rejected by his own. He will strike back at the nationalism of the chosen people. They will consider him a traitor to his people. They will take him outside the city to kill him.

Jesus has no interest in Isaac's blessing of Jacob, which establishes one as superior to others ("Be master of your brothers," Gen. 27:29). Jesus tells us that there can be no oppressors among us, that we are all brothers and that the greatest will be the servant.

For Jesus, the Father's work is all about uniting the children alienated from one another. What makes it difficult for that encounter to take place is the older brother, who sees himself as the chosen one, the good one, the one who obeys. "He became angry, and when he refused to enter the house, his father came out and pleaded with him." (Lk. 15:28)

Jesus' whole work, the redemption, is understood as demolishing the wall that divides brothers, that separates peoples. "For he is our peace, he who made both one and broke down the dividing wall of enmity, through his flesh." (Eph. 2:14). To destroy hate and create bonds. In Jesus the words of Isaiah are fulfilled, "Repairer of the breach,' they shall call you," (Is. 58:12)

The whole New Testament was written to help those who cannot grasp that "election" no longer means exclusion. This is what happened with Peter at Antioch. He was still afraid of

sitting down to a meal with pagans, for they were impure according to the Jewish law. And so Paul had to confront him about it. (Gal. 2:11-14)

## **Reparation as encounter**

You may be wondering why I am speaking about these stories of brothers? Why am I so concerned about poor Ishmael? I do it because I think that this great biblical image of brothers in conflict and God's choice as perverse has a lot to do with the reparative mission of Jesus and, because of that, with our community's mission.

The Constitutions say that "we endeavor to be agents of communion in the world." (n. 6) To work for communion is to do the work of the Father: trying to bring together his children who are in conflict with one another. We too want to repair breaches or, at least, be present in them.

Ishmael is thought to be the patriarch of the Arab peoples and, consequently, of the Moslems. The competition between Isaac and Ishmael in one way represents the tensions between Islam and Christianity, between Orient and Occident, between diverse cultures and religions. These tensions are expressed in wars, displacement of refugees, rejection of immigrants, xenophobia, religious persecution. Isaac and Ishmael continue to mistrust one another. The older son is still indignant at their father and does not want to go into the banquet with his brother.

In order to be agents of communion, we have to struggle against the "Sarah" that we all have within. We are "Sarah" when we anxiously demand our rights, when we demand recognition of the value of what we do, when we are bothered by others intervening in our affairs, when it gets into our heads that we are "the chosen ones" and, as a result, we justify our "excellence" into contrast to others. This attitude of "Sarah" leads to clericalism that does such damage to the Church. It makes us think of ourselves as an elite set apart, with the right to exercise power without checks and balances.

We create communion, however, when we resist exclusion, when we respect the rights of all, when we actively protect the little people, when we welcome the stranger and the one who is different, when we are humble.

As Pope Francis clearly indicated in his dialogue with religious during his recent visit to Chile (01/16/2018), serving the hungry, prisoners, the thirsty, the homeless, the naked, the sick...(cf. Mt 25:35) "has nothing to do with a welfare mentality or an attitude of paternalism, but rather with the conversion of hearts. The problem is not feeding the poor, or clothing the naked or visiting the sick, but rather recognizing that the poor, the naked, the sick, prisoners and the homeless have the dignity to sit at our table." In other words, it's not that Isaac feels sorry for Ishmael and gives him a hand out, but that he has to

recognize him as his brother, son of the same father and sit with him at the same table to eat. Francis adds, "This is the sign that the kingdom of heaven is in our midst."

You, brothers, who seek ways to engage in interreligious dialogue, who live in cultures different than your own, who welcome and accompany refugees, who in different ways try to overcome exclusion and tear down walls between people, you are participating in the mission of the Father, who urges his children to come together, and in the mission of the heart of Christ, who became one of us to bring together the dispersed children. This is the mission of the Congregation.

\*\*\*\*\*

Ishmael did not die of thirst in the desert. God took care of him (Gen. 21:19-29). God's action goes beyond the boundaries we set up, be they cultural, ethnic, religious or ecclesial. Wherever we go, Christ is already present, acting in the heart of each human being. No one has a monopoly on the things of God.

Ishmael reconnected with Isaac at the burial of his father Abraham. (Gen. 25:7-10) Esau once more embraced his brother Jacob many years after betraying him. (Gen. 33:4) However we don't yet know whether the older brother went in or not to the banquet prepared by their father so the two brothers could eat and rejoice together (Lk. 15:32). The response to the invitation also depends on us.

**Everything can be a lie  
except the truth that God is love  
and that all of humanity  
is but one family.**

Pedro Casaldáliga  
Claretian Bishop from Brazil  
Christmas 2010

