

First Reflection on Ven. John Merlini

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Biblical Reading: Acts 16, 1-10

"Paul arrived first at Derbe; next he came to Lystra, where there was a disciple named Timothy, whose mother was Jewish and a believer, and whose father was a Greek. Since the brothers in Lystra and Iconium spoke highly of him, Paul was anxious to have him come along on the journey. Paul had him circumcised because of the Jews of that region, for they all knew that it was only his father who was Greek. As they made their way from town to town, they transmitted to the people for observance the decisions which the apostles and presbyters had made in Jerusalem.

Through all this, the congregations grew stronger in faith and daily increased in numbers.

They next traveled through Phrygia and Galatian territory because they had been prevented by the Holy Spirit from preaching the message in the province of Asia. When they came to Mysia they tried to go on into Bithynia, but again the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them. Crossing through Mysia instead, they came down to Troas. There one night Paul had a vision. A man of Macedonia stood before him and invited him, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us'.

After this vision, we immediately made efforts to get across to Macedonia, concluding that God had summoned us to proclaim the good news there."

Help us!**(Actos 16, 6-10)**

The plans of Paul were, without doubt, to complete the evangelization of Asia Minor. But the Spirit intervenes two times and blocks him (v. 6-7), pointing him instead towards the coast. The time has not yet come to begin the asian mission.

A new divine intervention --the vision of Macedonia (v. 9)-- makes him discover God's Plan and the true objective of the trip: Europe as the place of the proclamation of the Good News (v. 10).

The mission among the gentiles and the expansion of the salvific community appears, once more, as a clear initiative of God, who works through the Spirit.

It is the Spirit who descends on Cornelius and his family, opening to the pagans the road to life (11, 18); the same Spirit entrusts to Paul and Barnabas and completes through them the work of expansion of the Word (13, 2; 14, 26; 15, 3.12); and now this same Spirit guides Paul towards the heart of the greek world, as the new mission field for evangelization.

It is the Spirit who, through the voice of Pope Pious VII, assigns the frontiers of Gaspar's evangelization; and it is still the Spirit who through the voice of Gaspar, indicates to Venerable John Merlini the missionary orientation of his life.

In this episode from Acts THREE MOMENTS can be distinguished:

- (a) the first is Paul's FRUSTRATION;
- (b) the second es Paul's EUPHORIA, or better,
PAUL AT THE TURNING POINT OF CULTURES;
- (c) the third is the NEW CALL.

1. Paul's Frustration.

The first two verses of the text help us see a sense of *frustration* and also of *monotony* that Paul is experiencing. The Apostle would like to preach in one place, but it is not possible; and in another place circumstances impede him.

The Spirit of the Lord, in the end, makes us understand that what Paul has in mind is NOT what needs to be done.

And so, he is obliged to live his everyday life without the openness of which, as a fiery spirit, he has need. He experiences, we can say, the *monotony* of each passing day. The same monotony that many of us note not just as a weight, but as a temptation which pushes us to act out of habit or, even worse, to feel demoralized in our very work and then to just let things go. Paul is taken up by this trial because his range of action is limited and restricted by circumstances.

What can be done now?

Widen a little our horizons, searching for a reasonable way to manage our difficulties. We are now able to discover that the weight of everyday life is what weighs many people down. We recall in this respect the example of Venerable Merlini.

Once called to the General Direction of the Congregation, and at the same time continuing to accompany the Institute of the Adorers of the Blood of Christ, he feels that he is not able to dedicate much time to his favorite activity: preaching. He is called to dedicate himself more than anything to the two congregations and he finds that his most usual field of labor is the desk, over which passes in every moment the history of each member of the Congregation, the events of each house, of each school, and of each preaching assignment of each of the missionaries. But he understands that this is now his way of being missionary. He consoles himself thinking that you preach also in helping others who preach. This is the consideration which he affectionately makes to the Brothers: "You also are missionaries, you also preach. The fact is that if it weren't for you (in the garden, in the kitchen, in the dining room) the priests would not have time to preach. Therefore, you are those who make it possible for them to preach and they preach, thanks to you!"

Each one of us in his own field of activity each day confronts these same situations. The experience of work brings along with it, it is true, a certain satisfaction. It is, nevertheless, restricted by some obligations and by some limitations: one grows weary in perseverance. It is difficult to avoid this fatigue!

Paul, in his frustration and in his apparent immobility, offers us a valid lesson. We should know how to accept our condition and to grow in SOLIDARITY with others, with the vast majority of humans. Living the "monotony" of every day, each one of us is inserted into the life of all humanity. And in this life of all humanity I join my moment of grace, of sacrifice, of effort, of renouncement so that so many people might have the courage to once again begin living.

Once more I would recall for our edification the guiding thoughts of Venerable John Merlini, whom I like to call "**the Saint of every day life**". The vast load of work is impressing, but he does not let it get to him. The pillars of his wisdom are four basic principles in which he is inspired:

- (1) The day is made up of 24 hours. Subtracting the hours we must sleep, the remaining hours are to be spent for the things of the Lord: all the hours and completely.
- (2) These hours are really spent for the Lord if spent in order to do the Will of the Lord. The problem, therefore, does not lie in doing great things, but things willed by God.
- (3) The Will of God is not known at first glance, but through an assiduous intimacy with God. Only the one who knows and loves God knows how to appreciate his way of thinking and of willing. Thus many hours of the day should be dedicated to intimacy with God. Without such intimacy, we run the risk of

worrying about many things not willed by God (and therefore useless, even if wonderful) or in doing the Will of God without love (and so badly).

(4) We should do everything well; therefore it is necessary to dedicate to them all the time that is needed. Haste, thus, is dismissed as a diabolical temptation, since it would be a waste of time, because to do something badly is the same as having lost time that is required to do it.

It is clear that it is not always possible to do all that which has to be done, but we should not suffer anxiety over it: God, as a matter of fact, asks us to do well those things that are possible to do. He does not ask the impossible of us.

Once again we return to the demand of intimacy with God, because it is He who makes known to us the things which must be done and it is He who teaches us to value their importance, and to set priorities. Our actions seen in this context becomes the necessary completion of prayer and prayer the necessary discernment and nourishment of our actions.

2. Paul at the turning point of cultures.

In **verse 8** it says that Paul and his companions, after having attempted a trip through various regions and having always returned along the same road, "*crossing through Mysia instead, they came down to Troas.*"

Troas is a locality near the ancient city of Troy, a center which is found near the ruins of the most ancient and famous city of the poets. Around Troas, in fact, the entire Epic Poem of Homer took place, whose repercussion in ancient times was very great.

I can imagine, therefore, that Paul also, being a man of culture and a reader of poets, finding himself in Troas and visiting these ruins, had experienced a great sense of joy and of continuity with the past. The past of a fascinating epic season, that remains almost unsurpassable not only in the history of classical culture, but also in general, of all cultures.

It is obvious to think that Paul, tired and a little weary of his daily routine, had taken on new strength, preparing himself thus for a marvelous night-time vision.

What does this say to us?

We have reflected a lot during these days on the concept of inculturation, as one of the distinct characteristics of our being as a international Missionary Institute. When we delve into a serious study of culture, history, the life of human beings, the daily monotony becomes nourished by whatever surpasses us: it is *pleasure of entering into cultural, spiritual and mental communion, with the enter human race that has preceded us and which accompanies us.*

We must make an effort to understand well the value of inculturation and of the study which this requires of us: through geography, history, traditions, customs, languages, etc. *we study the human being and his/her richness, **we study***

ourselves. This awareness enlarges the horizons of our small daily reality and prepares us for the big revelation.

3. The New Call.

We read again in **verse 9**: "*There one night Paul had a vision. A man of Macedonia stood before him and invited him, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.'*"

What changes in Paul's life at that moment?

The meaning of a new call.

Paul was living his monotonous workdays and now he had to interrupt his apostolate of which he could boast, and behold! "*a man of Macedonia*".

Each word of the verse has a precise meaning.

Macedonia indicates a great race of people, that of Alexander the Great and of other courageous conquerors. A Macedonian represented the pride of strength and also of culture.

Stood before him: this means to say a man in the fullness of his strength.

And this man *invited Paul*: he invited him just in the moment when Paul did not know what to do, did not understand the meaning of all the setbacks he was enduring, and when he felt useless. Just at that moment a Macedonian has need of him!

"*Help us*" (***boétheson emin***).

It is the same invocation the father of the epileptic boy uses when he says to Jesus: "Help us". Now the same word is directed to Paul and then the Apostle feels that before him is one who beseeches him as if he were Jesus.

We note that he does not say "Help me", but "Help us". The one who is beseeching Paul is a people, a civilization, humanity. Perhaps Paul understood all of a sudden the secret meaning of monotony, of weariness, of frustration, and the meaning of his perseverance day after day.

In other words, his eyes are opened: it was now not only Jesus who was calling him, but also this other person was calling him as if Jesus himself were there.

Paul felt invested with a great responsibility: ***it is a people, a rich, powerful, proud culture which is beseeching the Lord and Paul can do something.*** Out of the daily monotony of his working days, it is possible for an extraordinary help to come for that culture and those peoples.

A humanity which calls.

At the end of this reflection, we can ask ourselves: Who am I? Who are we as the global CPPS?

I am Paul. We-CPPS are Paul.

Our life, even when fundamentally peaceful, is still tiring, is a participation in the human suffering of all peoples. We think of the sick, of those who suffer, of the families in difficulties, of the unemployed, of the marginalized, of the fugitives, and of those who struggle for a more just world...Compared to theirs, our life still even when it is monotonous, takes place rather peacefully.

But we must hear the call of a humanity which needs the Lord, which needs his Word, which needs the service always newer and incisive, which we are maturing during these days, of a lived witness which makes us feel identified with the words of Venerable John Merlini: ***A director must go before others with his good example. What can I expect of others if I do not do it? I could never expect a holy Congregation if I am not sanctified myself and God only knows how much I still need to accomplish!*** And those other words which St. Gaspar liked to repeat to his Missionaries: ***"That which you are, shouts much louder than that which you preach!"***

Let us ask the Lord that he helps us understand how great our responsibility is and he grants us to be more specific and more disposed in order to reach out, in imitation of our Saints, to those who are in need and who are confided to our help and to our sacrifice.

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