

## A Missionary Heart

Enduring the catechumenate process in jail is a real lesson in what "spirituality" means. Often that word misleads us. Jesus guides us into a spirituality that does not take us away to ethereal mysteries in some outer space. It is not concerned primarily with sacred rites held in sacred times and places. Nor does it evolve around special prayers and formulas.

Jesus, rather, leads us to find the holy in all of those spots in society where human life is diminished to pay the debt, and well-being is sacrificed daily for the survival of "respectable society." As a matter of fact, this is just how Jesus got himself into so much trouble.

While it is true that Jesus never landed in jail as did John the Baptizer, he did experience arrest, false accusations, torture, and finally legal death by capital punishment. Still in those agonizing final hours of his life he identified forever with all who are judged and condemned. In those final hours he died in the manner that he lived, suffering "outside the gate, to sanctify the people by his own blood (Heb. 13:12)."

He had initiated his missionary career in a symbolic baptism in water which signaled to him the real baptism that was to come. For Jesus, initiation into the mysteries of the reign of God meant letting go of the deceptive securities of the city and its laws and customs. It meant making that journey down to the river to get into the line-up of repentant sinners.

It is in the river, in that humiliating posture of the repentant sinner that he hears the confirmation, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased (Mt. 3:17)." Throughout his ministry Jesus would struggle with the slowness of his disciples to understand this fuller meaning of his baptism: that he would be a rejected messiah who would allow himself to be immersed in that relentless river of the world's judgment.

An important part of the catechumenal process is discerning our commitment to community building. When we say that "here we have no lasting city" we don't mean that we are waiting passively for pie in the sky. Rather it means that the reign of God is not to be confused with the present city often built on deceit and on the backs of the poor.

Our initiation into the mysteries of God's reign involves an option for the poor, the commitment to work together with them --the stone rejected-- meant to become the cornerstone of a new society. "God chose the world's low born and despised, those who count for nothing, to reduce to nothing those who were something (1 Cor. 1, 26-28)."

We are being initiated into a new way of seeing the institutions and reality around us. This journey of faith means leaving securities and going "to him outside the camp, bearing the insult he bore (Heb. 13:13)."

Of course Baptism and Confirmation only mark the beginning. It is initiation into a life in which the eucharistic breaking of Word and Bread and sharing the Cup brings us time and again to commit ourselves once more to this covenant with God's poor.

A Precious Blood spirituality stubbornly insists on seeing the world from the point of view of the outcasts and condemned. We live every Eucharist as provisionally as Jesus did the last supper --ready to be carried off to our baptism. We are reminded of Archbishop Oscar Romero whose last Mass ended abruptly in the shedding of his own blood, for having clearly identified this building up of the "new city" among the poor of El Salvador.

For this reason also we share the bread and cup in fear and trembling. When we remain unconcerned about the plight of the poor, and go even further to hold them without mercy to their debts, what we believe to be Eucharist is only a charade. What kind of validity can Mass have if we are indifferent to the hungry in the world?

What Saint Paul describes locally is just as true on the global scale: "When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's Supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk (1 Cor. 11: 20-21)."

In some ways you don't choose your initiation into the prophetic missionary heart. There is a variety of rites today for initiation as associates or members of religious community or even the sacraments of Christian initiation. However, a basic respect for human rights would keep us from prescribing God's idea of a novitiate process for any one of these.

Think of the kind of "novitiate" prepared for Martin Luther King or Nelson Mandela, for Paul of Tarsus, Dorothy Day, or Gaspar del Bufalo. In each of these cases, it meant prison. Somehow their initiation into spirituality drew them first into that sacred space of the condemned. Each suffered a particular "baptism" which initiated a prophetic mission among the poor and the oppressed. Through such initiation a missionary heart was born.

We would do well often to bring to mind these flesh and blood profiles to understand the missionary heart. Today when we think of a profile, we tend to think of an abstract list of positive characteristics. Such documents suggest a state of perfection marked only by positive qualities. We need to look also at the darker sides of those very human hearts of our founding mothers and fathers. Often we're left with sanitized versions of the lives of our saints, so different from the accounts of sacred scripture.

How boldly the Bible portrays the dramatic transformation of David's adulterous and murderous heart into the favored partner in God's covenant. Or that God would entrust the sacred command "Thou shalt not kill" to Moses, one who had struggled with the reasons in his own heart for the passionate murder of the Egyptian slave manager.

We need to take courage from the words Jesus dropped into Simon Peter's complex missionary heart, so full of fear and denial: "Simon, Simon! Remember that Satan has asked for you, to sift you all like wheat. But I have prayed for you that your faith may never fail. You in turn must strengthen your brothers (Lk. 22:31-32)."

Every word and gesture of the risen Lord as captured in the fourth gospel reconfirms the truth that forgiveness is forever linked intimately with mission (Jn. 20:19-23). Certainly under normal circumstances the apostles would have expected incrimination from the Lord for having abandoned and even denied him. Fear reigned in their hearts. Can we imagine another likely scene? A former friend, hurt and betrayed, holding wounded hands in his face crying: "You'll pay for this!" The cycle of debt and injury would continue.

But what happens? The gesture is the same, but in place of the accusing words they may have expected, they receive words of reconciliation: "Peace be with you!" Then he renews the mission in a most forceful way: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." He breathes on them and continues, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

*(Fr. Thomas Hemm, C.P.P.S., "Shaping the Heart of the Missionary," The Wine Cellar, October 1995, pp. 27-38)*