

Pastoral Compassion

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Polce Halek ssc and Hendro Doweng ssc (left) ministering to people in remote areas of Sumatra (Indonesia).
In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Christians leave their churches to accompany the people in the struggle for peace and justice.

Our last General Chapter clearly identified and expressed an urgent need for a **deep pastoral and missionary conversion**. This was not merely some kind of strategic adaptation of the way we do things to the new sensibilities of our time. This was, above all, about seeking and promoting **new ways of being and serving in the Church**. In words dear to our founders: how do we make clear that who we are and the work we do is *'the work of God'* - a work that continues in creation, in the histories of our peoples and in the hearts of every man and every woman. Basically, that God loves through us and that his mercy reaches each person through our gestures, words and actions.

Where to start?

I would start with one observation and one conviction.

The observation is that a **large part of our time is spent in pastoral ministry**. When we are in our religious communities sharing or preparing points for preaching or we are together as a team organising a meeting or a day, or we are accompanying people, or coordinating teams, or visiting the sick, or giving religious classes ... all of this forms the frame of our pastoral activity. It is also part of our service when, whether personally or as a community, we bring to the feet of Jesus the people we have met, or those who have entrusted us with their lives, or the deep longings of our world ... In a pastoral "way" we are saying to the Lord: "Here are those you have entrusted to me and I ask you to help me see them as you see them, and to love them with your love."

My conviction is that to be in mission, to be a disciple, is to be with Jesus, for in him God the Father through his Spirit is already working in people, ever before we begin to proclaim or serve them. Wherever we are, God precedes us in the Spirit. That said, to recognize the presence of Jesus in the Spirit will involve energy, effort, attempts and errors, intelligence and wisdom and, above all, that we go out to meet the people where Jesus awaits us. How many times have we had the experience of being strengthened in the faith through the lives of people we have met and served!

The five loaves and the two fish

A good icon of how the pastoral ministry renews us in the encounter with Jesus is found in the story of Mark 6: 30-42. The Twelve return from a time of "mission", they meet Jesus and tell him everything they have done and taught in his name. It has been an intense period of activity, to the point that they did not even have time to eat. Then Jesus invites the apostles to meet with the disciples so that together they might retire and rest a little. But the crowds do not give them respite, they follow them wherever they go with Jesus. When he saw the crowds, he was inwardly moved. He could see that they were disoriented and so he taught them many things. One can imagine the reaction of the disciples ...: "You invite us to rest and you keep working"! That's why they went to Jesus to ask him to say goodbye to the crowds - so they could really rest a little.

Jesus had not forgotten the tiredness of his disciples nor his invitation that they spend time alone with him. But he also wanted to open up their way of thinking and doing by placing before them a challenge that seemed high impossible: "Give them something to eat". By asking this of them, Jesus pushes the disciples to be with people in a different way. He is instructing them about the importance of having empathy with people and illustrates how this is possible by drawing on their own experience. He does this by beginning with hunger – something that the disciples and the crowds have in common. Out of this shared experience they look to see what they have and discover resources that they could not have imagined, albeit no more than 5 loaves and two fish. It is through the tiredness jointly felt by Jesus and the disciples that they are able to help the crowds to rest and to relate to each other, sitting in rows of hundreds and fifties. It is out of this special closeness to Jesus that the disciples are able to serve the people, sharing with them bread, rest and the joy of being with the Master.

The disciples wanted to ignore the burden of the crowds so as to be with Jesus and rest a little. Instead, Jesus sends them to enter into another kind of relationship with the people. He is with them and he acts through them. He invites the disciples to be in relationships marked by mercy and compassion. It is the compassionate heart of Jesus, the shepherd that enables him to make his own the needs and joys of the disciples and those of the crowds. It is his compassion that enables him to see better what needs to be done and to understand the best way to be a pastor for the group. It is his compassion that finally allows him to place in the hands of God his Father, the longings, weariness and resources of this group so that they might become fruitful. Jesus himself, as pastor, connects with the merciful love of God his Father and transforms it, with the help of his disciples into shared encounter, bread and rest.

Pastoral ministry and the inner life

The document of the General Chapter on **Pastoral and Missionary Conversion**, offers us concrete paths - "**new paths to Emmaus**" - for finding new ways of being and serving in the Church.

- a) To be unceasing in asking the Lord Jesus - who precedes us and sustains us with his Spirit - for the **grace of conversion**. It is the Lord alone who can change our hearts. In the end, we ask that his merciful love purify our motives for action and help us to love and serve our brothers and sisters as He does.
- b) To discern together the challenges, aspirations and questions that come from our Church and our world. We do this with an open heart, with empathy and intelligence, informing ourselves and letting ourselves be questioned by what is happening in pastoral ministry and in our world. We look at our ministry as **believers in Jesus** to see where He is already at work and walking in our midst so that we may follow Him. And we look at our ministry **together**, brothers, sisters and secular members of the congregation, as well as with the people with whom we collaborate, with the men and women of our world who long for a creation and world that is reconciled and fraternal.
- c) To dare to take steps in the direction of new ways of being and serving in the Church. Like the disciples of Jesus, only by going to meet the crowds will we discover resources, ways to relate and serve, rest and a new closeness to Jesus.

The pastoral and missionary conversion needed to find new ways of being and serving in the Church is nothing other than allowing Jesus, who is our inner life, to love, serve and act through us.

Fraternally in the SSCC,

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