

A Church "in progress"

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Called to be in the "cracks" of people's lives

This last Holy Week was marked by some significant events: Notre-Dame Cathedral, Paris, was ablaze on Holy Monday. Through TV screens across the whole world, we became impotent witnesses to the flames that consumed this monument. Believers and non-believers were affected by the destruction of this building - a symbol not only of the great events in the history of France and Europe, of what it represents as an artistic and urban enclave in the heart of the city, but also of the Church itself. It was as if, paradoxically, while we were witnessing the fire, we discovered that the building, its living stones had to do, somehow, with us, with our history, with our faith, with the significant landmarks of the city. This event also raised a generosity in resources of people and money to start the rebuilding as soon as possible ... a work that is expected to be completed in five years. I wonder if the fire in this cathedral is showing us something essential about the Church, which is at one and the same time, an unfinished work that is waiting for the Lord - and, therefore, always "in fieri", a work "in progress" that goes out to meet the Lord. That would then define for us a way of being Church, not only as a broad range of "builders" involved in a long-term work - of which Notre-Dame is an emblematic example - but above all as "repairers" who collaborate with Jesus in his work of reparation. In this perspective of reparation, a stricken Church recalls that its members are called to be in the "fractures" of society and in the "cracks" of people's lives. It recalls that the precious materials with which we seek to repair the Church are the "rubble", "the waste" or "the ruins". This is

what Jesus reminds us of: the stone rejected by hasty architects has become, after his death and resurrection, the cornerstone. Where today are those living, rejected stones, which in the hands of patient 'repairers' and with Jesus' help can be turned into precious and solid stones?

"Its members are called to be in the 'fractures' of society and in the 'cracks' of people's lives"

The vocation of the great saint, Francis of Assisi, emerged and matured when the Lord called him out of a Church in ruins. Francis never imagined that by responding generously and boldly to this call, he would contribute not only to reforming the Church of his time, but also to enriching humanity by caring for the little ones and the poor, as well as creation.

The Passion goes on until the end of history

Easter Sunday, the feast of the Risen Lord, was bloodied by attacks on three churches in Sri Lanka. Simultaneously there were three attacks on luxury hotels, in a top spot tourist destination. More than 350 people were killed. Believers and tourists, equally affected by human barbarism. A bloody deed that harshly actualised what is celebrated in the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus, is the peace among peoples, a peace that he first established in his own body, through the Cross and then in his pilgrim body in history, the Church. The dead and risen Lord, the members of his Body in the Church, descend to the darkness and hell that is stubbornly produced through religious intolerance, racial hatred and social injustice. The wounds that the risen Christ shows to his disciples remind us that his Passion continues in its members until the end of history. The creation of the New Man in Jesus takes place in his flesh, thus "putting to death enmity" (Eph. 2:16). One collaborates in the coming of that New Man by following the courageous steps of the Lord Jesus who carried forward his work of reparation "in poverty and persecution" (LG 8). His ability to become close and vulnerable to the different forms of violence, will entail for his disciples a growing understanding as to what triggers violence in society and in our own hearts. His victory through death, ensures that human efforts to make peace, lives sacrificed and offered, are neither useless nor sterile. When we proclaim in the creed our faith in the Church, we might take note that we do so as a Church that is vulnerable to martyrdom as a consequence of our fidelity to the Lord, to Him who is "poor and patient"

We recognise each other walking together

On another level, during Holy Week I was able to help out in a parish in Calabria (in southern Italy). One can only admire the faith of the people who set out to participate in these holy days. The Via Crucis covered almost the entire town. It was presided over by the image of a recumbent Christ carried in a transparent casket that was followed by his Mother. Following these in the procession were Roman soldiers, women dressed in black, men and women disciples and angels who were escorting the Christ. Many people contemplating the dead Christ and his Mother, were moved to tears. A marching band accompanied the procession with music directed "To my father". Elders, young people, dads with children in arms or in cars all formed part of the procession. Others crowded the balconies or left the bar to follow the procession for a moment. Elderly people who were no longer able to leave their homes greeted the passage of the procession from their

windows with the sign of the cross. Also people with different disabilities, who I had not seen before, joined the procession. We could all identify with this way of the cross. Following the reclining Christ or his sorrowful Mother, each participant carried his or her own cross: illness, unemployment, family conflicts, loneliness, violence, lack of future prospects, etc. The procession touched the inner lives of many. Once again an essential dimension of the Church was made visible - the place where all fit and in which all are important. Walking together, we come to recognise each other and realise that the Lord and his Mother are with us and are like us.

Damien, a deep sense of the Church

In this month of May we celebrate our brother, Father Damien. Rereading all of his letters, for now translated only into English, we can appreciate how Damien had a deep sense of the Church. For him the Church was Christ Today. Not only was the Lord present in the tabernacle of his chapels, but also in the lacerated bodies of the lepers. In this way of seeing, everything took on a transfigured meaning in the light of the resurrection: donations in money and prayers, nails and materials for the construction of chapels and hospitals, music instruments to accompany the liturgy and recreation, voices that come together in prayer and singing, dresses and medicines to care for wounded bodies, the magic lantern to put colours in the lives of children, the tools for making windows and coffins. In fidelity to the Lord Jesus, Damien loved the lepers of Molokai, sharing their lives with them, healing the pains caused by estrangement and exile, carrying the cross of sickness and death. In doing all this, Damien did not ask for anything other than prayers that he would not lose heart in following Jesus and that he would be able to carry his cross in his special Golgotha that was Molokai. Like Jesus the shepherd, his joy came from

“Like Jesus the shepherd, his joy came from knowing himself more and more united to his flock, serving his sheep until the end”

knowing himself more and more united to his flock, serving his sheep until the end. Damien's last letter, dated 15th March 1889, was addressed to **Ambrose Hutchison** (1859-1932) the superintendent residing in Kalaupapa since 1879. In this letter, he asked for a coffin for Naheluna, an old leper who had died that night.

May Damien intercede for us and help us to love and serve the Body of Christ in its most precious members, the poorest and most vulnerable, until the last breath of our lives.

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