

Pastoral and missionary conversion. An unpredictable grace.

Alberto Toutin ssc
Superior General

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In many communities of the congregation brothers have been reflecting on the theme of pastoral and missionary conversion in respect of our apostolic presences. In fact, such a theme is being addressed in Provincial Chapters throughout the Congregation. Our reflections are inspired by the two major documents of our last General Chapter: "Our Inner Self is Being Renewed Day by Day" and "Pastoral and missionary conversion, new paths to Emmaus". The first document is more inspirational while the second one is more programmatic. In any case, both are doors that can lead to a process of conversion the relevance and fruitfulness of which can only be appreciated by those who enter into this journey of discernment and practical decision making.

It may be useful to keep in mind some aspects that can help us to enter into this process.

The grace of conversion

When we reread our own life or meditate on God's word, we can see that the moments of conversion are fundamentally the fruit of a **grace**, a gift given to us by the Lord. This grace can arise from an encounter with the Lord in his word that appears to us in a new, inspiring, simple way. Or it can come to us through some event that bursts into our lives and in which, *a posteriori*, we recognize the presence of the Lord. In either case, the grace of conversion is not something immediate or obvious. It presupposes our capacity for reflective discernment, a using of all our intelligence, sensitivity, and fine listening, so

that we may perceive where and in what way is the Lord calling us through his Word or through some event that has broken into our lives. In this regard, I find it inspiring to understand that the prophet - each one of us insofar as we are baptized - is a "**person of the word**", that is, an individual who acts as a spokesperson for a God who speaks both in words and deeds. By listening and being open the prophet is able to perceive what the Lord is saying. This word becomes effective in the prophet when he or she freely adheres to what is perceived as the voice and word of God and assumes the commitment to communicate it. At the same time, the prophet is also a "**person of the Spirit**", one who allows the Spirit to penetrate his or her heart - in moments of growth as well as in times of folds and shadows - to purify, unify and heal it so that the mind and the feelings of God, of Christ become those of the prophet.

No one has a monopoly on the Spirit, and discernment is an action that takes place in the plural. Thus, in order to perceive the Word of God and the action of his Spirit, we need to discern individually and communally in order to be able to say to ourselves: "this is what the Lord is telling me" or "I perceive that the Lord is inviting us here" and to place this in common so that the word that has resounded in each one of us may resound in all of us. Moreover, when we seek to perceive what the Lord is saying to us we also need to discern between that which is a movement of the Spirit and that which originates from within us - for not everything that comes from within us is healthy and pure. Sharing in discernment with the brothers can help us to better perceive what the Spirit of the Lord is saying to me and to us. And by discerning together, we allow for what the Spirit says in one brother to possibly resonate in another, making us mediators of the Spirit to one another.

Detached from reality

The longed-for pastoral and missionary conversion that we want for our works and presences expresses a genuine concern that also permeates vast sectors of our Church. A concern that translates into ecclesial language the concern of social movements that political institutions be close to their citizens and watch over the common good. But this desire for change among us runs the risk of remaining just programmatic words, rather than resulting in actual change. I believe that in general there exists among us **a certain detachment from reality** more than a lack of discourse or theology on mission; a detachment from the kind of reality that bite us, shock and outrage us. I wonder how much we have been moved by the social mobilisations and the cries for justice and dignity that are being voiced in our various countries from Ecuador, Chile, through France and the United States to India and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. How can we make the legitimate demands of these movements our own and how do they affect our outlook on society and our ways of being in it? And then what challenges do these movements pose to our pastoral forms and styles or do we continue to function as if what happens in the streets of our countries are not echoed in our Christian communities and among ourselves? Another indicator of this detachment from a reality that may hurt us has to do with how much we let ourselves be affected by the pain of the victims of the abuses of power, sexuality and conscience in the Church and how affected are we by the shame of the perpetrators, who are also among us. Allowing ourselves to be affected by reality with all its questions and demands and discerning our response can mobilise our interests, our readings, our formation needs and awaken us to take initiatives with others.

An unreflecting Church

When we talk about the pastoral and missionary conversion of the Church, we do not always ask ourselves: "**But which Church do we want to convert?**" Many times, when we speak of the Church, we speak of the Church of others, of those on the other side, on the other shore, as it were. However, we seem to speak very little of the Church that we are, the one to which we belong. The Church that we are is revealed not so much by our discourses on the Church, but by our practices. Our practices can, in turn, mirror an image or model of the Church that has not been sufficiently reflected upon. One image of the Church, for example, is revealed in the way we react to the criticism or evaluation that others make of the pastoral work that we are exercising, or when we speak of other religious, or of the groups or movements that do not think like us, or when we speak of the bishops, or when we "gossip" about the brothers outside the community or about the priests or religious of the diocesan clergy or of other congregations, or when we refer to the popular piety of simple people, or when we speak of how the liturgy should be celebrated at home and especially in the Christian communities, etc. The idea of a Church not reflecting upon itself becomes apparent here and the more the church does not reflect or question as to what it is doing, the more this will impact on the decisions and choices we make. If we do not submit our practices to a community discernment, there will be no pastoral and missionary conversion of our presences, no matter how much we talk about it in assemblies and chapters.

Some guidelines for a pastoral conversion

So that our discernment might engage this image of an unreflecting Church and translate it into new practical ways of being and serving in the Church, I propose here some directions drawn from an ecclesial kind of GPS:

1. To allow ourselves to be questioned as regards our ways of carrying out our pastoral service.
2. To put a face to those who live in the peripheries, so that they do not remain abstract subjects.
3. To go out and find them, and not remain on the side-lines.
4. To let ourselves be touched by the pain of people, to the point where we either weep or become outraged at what is happening.
5. To place ourselves and not just our words on the side of the poor, of those who suffer, of those who do not count, of those who do not matter.
6. To listen in the first person to the Word of God as a word the Lord is addressing to me and to seek to incarnate it in my life before preaching it to others.
7. To recognise my own personal and institutional vulnerability and before the Lord and the brothers embrace it as a place where the grace of conversion awaits me.
8. To value listening to people and value the simple services such as welcoming weakness and washing away wounds.

9. To learn to walk with the poor and to seek with them ways of being and serving them.
10. To walk the paths where the transforming power of the Gospel can be discovered in a new way.

May the Lord come to visit us with his grace in our discernments and decisions in view of a pastoral and missionary conversion of the Church and also of our hearts.

Fraternally,

Alberto Toutin ssc
Superior General