

A People of Brothers and Sisters

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Recent demonstrations for peace in Israel and Palestine

Dear brothers,

From 26 to 28 May 2021 a joint online assembly of superior generals was held online. More than 250 participants connected from all over the world. The theme that brought us together was: "Becoming sisters and brothers: consecrated life at the service of fraternity in a wounded world". There was something in the title that disturbed me. Then, as the superiors shared with each other, my concern became clearer. I realised how, on the one hand, religious life itself bears wounds: the reduction in numbers in many parts of the world, the loss of credibility on account of abuse committed by some of its members, the little strength left to offer evangelical ways of life that can provide for the transformation and improvement of the lives of men and women, especially the poorest, and consequently mobilise many more to associate themselves in this urgent task. With regard to the fraternal life, I once again noted that it remains a longing and an ongoing task, and that it is often ourselves, through our own wounds or those we inflict on others, who are the main obstacle to its joyful realisation.

On the other hand, I noted as a matter of fact that this time of pandemic has clearly affected us deeply: brothers and sisters became sick, others died, in a drastic decrease in our economic income, fears and insecurities were awakened in our hearts. While there has never been a lack of bread on our tables, work or shelter, the pandemic has impoverished us and imposed a more

sober lifestyle on us. At the same time, the pandemic has awakened in many the best in the human heart - generosity, dedication, attention to others, solidarity – as well as the worst - withdrawing into ourselves under more or less presentable forms of taking care of ourselves first in order to take care of others, fear and distrust of others who become a threat to what is "mine" (health, space, comfort). Deep down, religious life also carries with it its wounds. As does the world, wounded by the pandemic, a world which touches us deeply and which has "twinned" us with so many men and women. If I were to rephrase the theme of our meeting, it could be this: a wounded world and religious life at the service of fraternity. The wounds already inflicted on religious life are relativised by the vastness of the wounds in our world that the pandemic has provoked and enabled us to see. Faced with scepticism regarding the possibilities of change for the better for human beings and faced with cynicism regarding what hurts us today in our world, and deep down believing that everything will remain the same as before, religious life can question itself about its contribution to our world to ensure that the men and women who inhabit it grow in humanity, in fraternity.

Letting oneself be surprised by God's closeness

When we reread God's teaching in the Bible, it is the unprecedented closeness of God that is the foundation of fraternity. God takes the initiative and becomes the interlocutor of a community that he patiently accompanies so that they become a people, his people, and recognise him as their God. God thus puts himself in step with the people he wants to form and accepts to walk with them. And since God wants this people to be a community of men and women who love him as his sons and daughters, and who are brothers and sisters to each other, he takes as his path the path of human freedom, which is built in dialogue and openness to others and which involves constant achievements, falls and constant sharing. Even when his children experience the remoteness or silence of God or even the sense of being abandoned by God, it is God who once again takes the initiative and makes himself available to show his ways and to revive the march of his people. This is the profound experience of the people of Israel in exile, far from the land God gave them in promise and without the institutions that reminded them of his presence. "But Zion said, 'The LORD has forsaken me, the LORD has forgotten me'. – Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has born? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!" (Is 49:15).

The closeness of God serving as the foundation of the community of the people God wants to form is realised even more strikingly in Jesus. In him, God becomes God-with-us. What is attractive about his person is his proclamation of the closeness of the God when he announces, "God is already reigning in your midst". He demonstrates this through a loving coherence between his words and his actions. He is the shepherd who seeks out the lost sheep and rejoices with them when they welcome God's forgiveness. He is also at times that "unwelcome friend" who comes in the night to ask us for bread and welcome. Thus, when he wanted to leave his disciples a gesture that summarised his life and reminded them of the kind of bond that should prevail between them, he again stoops down, becomes their servant and washes their feet. And in the ways he approaches us, he will continue to surprise us when he returns to the table and serves those who are vigilant and joyful in the service of their brothers and sisters.

The power of tenderness

By his closeness, God's vocation is to become a people. He wants this people to discover that they are his sons and daughters and brothers and sisters to one another. The pandemic is reminding us in our own fragile flesh of our intimate dependence on one another and the need to care for our common home that shelters and nourishes us. The pandemic has been no respecter of persons and has brought us closer together as humanity. Of course, peoples grow in their sense of belonging when they face common hardships and difficulties together. But for these difficulties to make us better people than we were before, we need to leave behind the notion that what is "mine" (my health, my time, my work, etc.) is more important than what is "ours", and decisively take to walking with others. If the pandemic has brought us forcibly and painfully closer to one another, let us now turn to our fellow human beings, so that we may increasingly share their struggles and their joys, their hopes and their failures, and become ever more responsible for our shared fragility. Perhaps God will heal the wounds that weigh us down in religious life to the extent that we decentre ourselves and care for the wounds of the Lazaruses we have not yet seen, who are there in the street, at the door of our homes and churches or even in our own communities and families. In doing so we will joyfully discover the brothers and sisters with whom the Lord wants us to walk. And we will be surprised to see that it is the power of tenderness that heals the wounded world.

I invite you to make our own this prayer of our brother Esteban Gumucio who speaks from his heart to the Heart of Jesus.

Jesus,
I want to live in such a way that I become as transparent as crystal.
May you be seen in the simplicity of my person;
to simply be "myself-with-others",
to make appear your mystery and grace, Jesus of Nazareth.
No, it is not from my window
that I should look out for signs of your coming today.
It is by looking into what is happening
to my brothers and sisters and to me
every single day;
what is happening to my people and to me

May the Hearts of Jesus and Mary fill us with their tenderness and make us feel the joy of being a people of brothers and sisters with the men and women with whom we walk together today.

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