

# “The poor you will always have with you” (Mk 14:7)

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*Alberto Toutin ssc  
Superior General*

**INFO SSCC Brothers No 156 – 1 July 2021**



Eliseu Alfredo lies prostrate as women offer the smoke of incense during the litany of the saints - the prayer of the people of God - in Marera (Mozambique) which forms part of the ordination ceremony.

**D**ear brothers,

These words of Jesus could sound fatalistic. They appear to be a confirmation of a persistent fact, painfully present throughout history.

However, this is Jesus' emotional response to a gesture full of tenderness. An anonymous woman brings a precious perfume which she pours on his head. What moved this woman to make such a gesture and how did her actions impact on Jesus? Jesus allows her to act, he lets himself be loved. He gives a meaning to her actions. It is a foretaste of his departure from this world, of his death. For her part, this woman expresses the love that defies death and says to her beloved, "even if you die, let me love you here and now, intensely".

The disciples, on the other hand, remain on the surface of the events they witness. They think that what this woman is doing is a waste, even if her actions are directed towards the Lord Jesus. They let themselves be guided by calculations and think, well intentioned, that by selling the perfume the resulting money could be given to the poor. But this is the wrong way to think because such thinking distracts their attention from the present. It is inappropriate. What is the point of thinking at such a moment of the poor whom they do not see or meet, if

they are not moved by the gesture that is happening right before their eyes? Jesus invites them to be present, to be present as this woman is present evidencing her tenderness in her concrete gesture. They are to look at and appreciate Jesus while he is there, in their midst. He then announces to them that soon they will no longer see him; he will no longer be with them; his presence will be designated rather by an absence and by an ardent expectation of his return. When Jesus is gone, then, and with the same urgency and attention that this woman has for Jesus, he asks the disciples to turn their gaze and their attention to the poor, who will always be there. In the here and now they are to see this woman who renders herself present, a gift offered to Jesus. And when Jesus is no longer with them, they are, in his name, to look at the poor and serve them: "whatever you did for one of the least of these, you did it for me" (Mt 25:40).

### **The poor, sacraments of Christ**

In his message for the 5<sup>th</sup> World Day of the Poor - to be celebrated on 14 November 2021 - Pope Francis invites us to approach the poor, who are always with us, with attention, urgency, and concrete love. Just as Jesus highlighted the gesture of this woman as a tangible proclamation of the Good News, so the Pope recalls the figure of our brother Damien, who was good news for the poor of Molokai. Damien, like so many others, decided to serve Jesus in the poor, sharing with them his life, his faith, his meals, his sorrows and even his illnesses, marginalisation, and isolation. The pope's portrait of Damien is both moving and enthusing:

"I think, among others, of Father Damien de Veuster, the saintly apostle to the lepers. With great generosity, he answered the call to go to the island of Molokai, which had become a ghetto accessible only to lepers, to live and die with them. He rolled up his sleeves and did everything he could to improve the lives of those who were poor, ill and outcast. He became both doctor and nurse, heedless of the risks involved, and brought the light of love to that "colony of death", as the island was then called. He himself contracted leprosy, which became the sign of his total sharing in the lot of the brothers and sisters for whom he had given his life. His testimony is most timely in our own days, marked by the coronavirus pandemic. The grace of God is surely at work in the hearts of all those who, without fanfare, spend themselves for the poorest, sharing with them in concrete ways."

May we be moved by the poor who are always with us and, encouraged by the woman of the Gospel and by Damien, may we be good news for them, in concrete gestures of tenderness and in shared life.

Fraternally,

Alberto Toutin  
*Superior General*