

The urgent need for closeness

Alberto Toutin ssc
Superior General

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Jan Dziadkiewicz ssc, Winnicka (Ukraine)

Dear Brothers,

In February this year, an “international theological symposium on the priesthood” was held in Rome. It was organised by the Congregation for Bishops. During the symposium, Pope Francis gave a keynote talk. He wanted it to be neither a speech nor a theoretical reflection. Instead, he opened his pastoral heart and shared what has animated him in his ministry for more than 50 years. His guiding principle as a priest has been the desire to make present in his ministry Jesus’ style, his way of being “close, compassionate and tender”.

Being close can be manifested in four ways that illuminate and nourish each other: closeness to God, closeness to the bishop, closeness among the priests and closeness to the People of God. Pope Francis highlighted the importance being close to God and being close to the people whom he has entrusted to the ministers. One leads to the other. God desires to be a people and Jesus announces the nearness of God by forming a diverse community composed of apostles, disciples, and the crowds. Contemplating what is happening in this people, Jesus rejoices at what God is doing: it is the poor, the little ones, the prostitutes, the foreigners, who are ready to welcome the Good News of his Kingdom. Moreover, in accompanying his community and confronting his adversaries, Jesus suffers on account of the difficulties that hinder the acceptance of the unheard-of closeness of God at work in his person.

Proclaiming the nearness of God, Jesus becomes incarnate by becoming a neighbour to his people. In Jesus, God becomes love, vulnerable and patient in the face of the violence and misunderstanding that nestle in our hearts. To be shepherds in the style of Jesus means to share in the joys of the people entrusted to us, taking part in their struggles. It is the humble and respectful power that he has for the people that imprints its character on the exercise of our ministry.

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May we give thanks to God for bringing us pastors who are close to us and who speak to us through lives lived close to God and close to his people.

When Damien learned of his leprosy, he was advised to return to his home country. But his shepherd's heart could not bear to be separated from the lepers of Molokai and where would they be without their shepherd! The bonds Damien forged with the lepers grew as he too became vulnerable and succumbed to their illness.

Jan Dziadkiewicz ssc from Poland, who has been working in Winnicka (Ukraine) for more than 23 years, has also decided to stay with God's people in that country. He has no other weapons than his closeness to and the name of Jesus.

Lord, help us to become shepherds close to your people and let us allow ourselves to be evangelised by their faith.

Fraternally,

Alberto Toutin ssc
Superior General