

STATIO CONFERENCE

GET OUT OF THE SANCTUARIES... GO OUT AND SMELL LIKE THE SHEEP

By: Sr. M. Celine Saplala, OSB

I. In his Homily at the Chrism Mass of March 28, 2013, Pope Francis told the assembled priests:

"The priest who seldom goes out of himself, who anoints little.... misses out on the best of our people, on what can stir the depths of his priestly heart. Those who do not go out of themselves, instead of being mediators, gradually become intermediaries, managers. We know the difference: the intermediary, the manager, "has already received his reward", and since he doesn't put his own skin and his own heart on the line, he never hears a warm, heartfelt word of thanks. This is precisely the reason for the dissatisfaction of some, who end up sad – sad priests - in some sense becoming collectors of antiques or novelties, instead of being shepherds living with "the odour of the sheep". This I ask you: be shepherds, with the "odour of the sheep"

This was given at the first Holy Week a few days after the March 13, 2013 election of Pope Francis. Two years after, our Holy Father is still using the image of the sheep and shepherds.

Writing in a letter last March 3, 2015 to the theological faculty of the Pontifical Catholic University of Argentina, the pope also adapted the "smell" phrase he has used to describe the type of Catholic bishops he wants, calling on theologians to "smell of the people and of the road." "Do not settle for a theology of the desk," he continues. "Your place for reflection are the boundaries." And do not fall into the temptation to paint over them, to perfume them, to adjust them a bit and tame them," Francis writes. "The good theologians, like the good shepherds, smell of the people and of the road and, with their reflection, pour oil and wine on the wounds of humankind." (*Joshua J. McElwee, NCR Today, Mar. 9, 2015*)

II. Shepherds Smelling like the Sheep

What's about a sheep? we may ask.

Wikipedia states that sheep have a reputation for being dumb...often straying unwittingly into danger. Another way of looking at it is to say that they don't have minds of their own. They can easily be manipulated and led in wrong directions. It is easy to lead a sheep to slaughter. That's why they need shepherds – to herd them in the right direction and keep them safe and will lead them instead to green pastures and still waters. Sheep are totally dependent of the shepherd for every need; they need the "rod and staff" guidance. Sheep must have a leader (shepherd) and must be told what to do and where to go, otherwise they'll wander off and get lost. Sheep are afraid of the unknown, of darkness, and of strange pastures and buildings. That keeps them appreciative of the shepherd and his helpers. It keeps them together for their mutual support and comfort.

Sheep don't like to be sheared, cleaned. One writer remarked, "... let me remind you of one thing about sheep – They smell. Let's face it, sheep are smelly and greasy. And those who hang around sheep also smell".

III. What's behind Pope Francis' oft reference to the image of a sheep?

Sheep metaphors are frequent in Pope Francis' speeches and homilies. Urging priests, theologians and bishops to spend time among people, he told them they should be "shepherds living with the smell of sheep."

In writing the book *Why Pope Francis Leads the Way He Leads*, Chris Lowney, a former Jesuit seminarian interviewed some Jesuit priests as well as former seminarians. Lowney himself admitted that working now in the corporate world, he often refers back to his seminary training. One of the Jesuits interviewed, Fr. Alejandro Gauffin related that "... the bishop of Buenos Aires decided to launch a new parish in the vicinity of the Jesuit seminary and asked Fr. Bergoglio to serve as its first pastor (apparently because he had so much free time remaining after feeding pigs, doing laundry, serving as spiritual director for a few dozen Jesuits, teaching theology, and who knows what else). This would be Fr. Bergoglio's first concentrated experience in parish work, and his approach proved unconventional.

"...He drew up a crude map of the neighborhood, sectioned it off into small zones, and assigned seminarian volunteers like Gauffin to each zone. To do what? Get their feet dirty. Walk the streets. Meet people where they live. Here's how Gauffin put it: "The slogans I remember most were these, 'get into the neighborhood and walk it,' 'don't "comb the sheep," meet all of them,' 'visit the poor and take care of their need,' 'get the kids for [religious instruction].'" In other words, "You're not going to find your answers sitting behind that desk."

Pope Francis has since come back to the same ideas multiple times, often in equally vivid imagery: "A Church that does not go out of itself, sooner or later, sickens from the stale air of closed rooms," or "We understand reality better not from the center, but from the outskirts," or, perhaps most sharply, "We cannot become starched Christians, too polite, who speak of theology calmly over tea. We have to become courageous Christians and seek out those who need help most."

Fr. Bergoglio made abundantly clear to his seminarians that they have to be courageous and seek out those who most need help, but not with the condescendingly smug attitude that they have so much to give these inferior creatures. Their seminary formator instilled in them that courage includes the willingness to admit how little they really understand the world and must learn from the poor. Another priest who was interviewed remembers Fr. Bergoglio instructing them that "You have to learn from the people before you teach them anything." Precisely because the seminarians had so much to learn, Fr. Bergoglio used to tell them that closeness to poor people was "important for the formation of the priest's heart." (*Lowney*)

IV. "Learn from the Wisdom of the Poor."

Earnest L. Tan in his pamphlet "*Why I Love Pope Francis*" writes about an evening he was watching an interview of a priest who found renewed vitality in his ministry with the indigenous people. He clearly attributed this to the modeling of Pope Francis and his concern for the poor and the marginalized. Congruent with his revered leader he claims: "I am actually the one whom the indigenous people are ministering to."

This reminds me of my experience with the Aetas of Porac which I would like to share here:

On the first occasion that I stayed for a few days in the mountains of Porac, I brought with me a lot of things that I felt I needed. After some days, I found out that I had no use of the face powder, the extra bath room slippers (the mountain was the “bathroom”), the small mirror, an extra veil. I simply had no need for these. The Aetas in Villa Maria, Porac taught me how to live simply with only the most basic and minimum necessities. When conducting meetings with them, I set the time just as I am wont to do in the classroom or with other sisters, saying “Let us meet at 1:30 pm or “after lunch”. Way past 1:30 or after my own lunch, there were no Aetas in sight. So instead of waiting for them to come to the hut used by sisters, I walked to the other hill and found the Aetas gathered around a small bonfire roasting a big camote. In my watch that was almost three o’clock. As we conversed, they told me that they came from gathering food and the big camote was THE food for the day. Any time they have a camote, gabi or corn harvested by one will be shared by all, neighbors included. Then I realized that meals for them were not as regular as we who are used to having these at set times. The expression “after lunch” is no measure of time for them. And so they taught me how to set time for activities with nature as reference. They said, “Sister, just say *when the sun is still young*, if you mean 6:30 or 7 am. Or *when the sun is cooler, or when your own shadow is longer* if you mean 5 pm. They blessed me with new and practical knowledge, to honor nature, and not be a servant to my time piece. In living and working with them, the bias and notions that have been culturally planted in me as a lowlander about Aetas were corrected. Not only my learning but my conversion was taking place.

In his Message to Young People, Palm Sunday, April 13, 2014, Pope Francis reminded the youth that:

“...the poor are not just people to whom we can give something. They have much to offer us and to teach us. How much we have to learn from the wisdom of the poor! Think about it: several hundred years ago a saint, Benedict Joseph Labré, who lived on the streets of Rome from the alms he received, became a spiritual guide to all sorts of people, including nobles and prelates. In a very real way, the poor are our teachers. They show us that people’s value is not measured by their possessions or how much money they have in the bank. A poor person, a person lacking material possessions, always maintains his or her dignity. The poor can teach us much about humility and trust in God. In the parable of the Pharisee and the tax-collector (cf. Lk 18:9-14), Jesus holds the tax-collector up as a model because of his humility and his acknowledgment that he is a sinner. The widow who gave her last two coins to the temple treasury is an example of the generosity of all those who have next to nothing and yet give away everything they have.” (Lk 21:1-4)

V. Learning from Pope Francis’ Love for the Poor

In his visit to the Philippines, the words of the Holy Father “to remember all those who feel unloved, who have no hope for the future and who have given up on life out of discouragement, disappointment or fear” became more palpable. He stated further, “We have to learn to be on the side of the poor, and not just indulge in rhetoric about the poor! Let us go out to meet them, look into their eyes and listen to them. The poor provide us with a concrete opportunity to encounter Christ himself, and to touch his suffering flesh.”

Every Filipino, whether they were present or not in the places where Pope Francis celebrated Mass, delivered a conference, visited orphanage, or simply passed by in his pope mobile has surely an impression, a realization or a memory of Pope Francis' greetings, gestures, smile, conferences, prayers and wishes for the Filipino people truly shining with Mercy and Compassion. We were humbled by his humility, gentleness and "speeches reflective of the profound heart of a shepherd". (*Impact Magazine. Editor's Note, January 2015, vol. 49 No. 1*)

From his Homily to the Bishops, Priest and Religious on January 16, 2015, Manila Cathedral:

"The poor. The poor are at the center of the Gospel. At the heart of the Gospel. If we take away the poor from the Gospel, we cannot understand the whole message of Jesus Christ."

From his Address at the Meeting of Families at the Mall of Asia Arena, January 16, 2015:

"I would ask you as families, to be especially mindful of our call to be missionary disciples of Jesus. This means being ready to go beyond your homes and to care for our brothers and sisters who are most in need, I ask you especially to show concern for those who do not have a family of their own, in particular those who are elderly and children without parents. Never let them feel isolated, alone and abandoned, but help them to know that God has not forgotten them".

From the Mass in Tacloban, January 17, 2015:

"I'd like to tell you something close to my heart. When I saw this catastrophe from Rome, I felt that I had to be here. And on those very days, I decided to come here. I am here to be with you. A little bit late, I have to say, but I'm here." (Italics and underscoring mine)

In comforting further the people in Tacloban, the Pope told them that "the Lord never lets us down. He is Lord from the cross. Jesus is there for you. The Lord is the same with us in everything. That is why we have a Lord who is capable of crying with us, capable of walking with us in the most difficult moments of life."

From his address during the meeting with the Youth at UST, January 18, 2015

"Dear girls, boys, young people in today's world there is a great lack of capacity of knowing how to cry. Those that are left to one side are crying. Those who are discarded are crying. But {those of us who love a life more or less without needs don't know how to cry.} Certain realities in life we only see through eyes that are cleansed through our tears.

I invite each one of you here to ask yourself, have I learned how to weep, how to cry? {When I see a child with hunger, a child on drugs on the street, a child who doesn't have a house, a child abandoned, a child abused, a child used by a society, as a slave}? Unfortunately, there are those who cry because they want something more. This is the first thing I'd like to say. Let us learn how to weep.

Jesus in the Gospel, he cried. He cried for his dead friend. He cried in his heart for the family that had lost daughter. He cried when he saw the poor widow having to bury her son. And he was moved to tears, to compassion when he saw the multitude of crowds without a pastor. If you don't learn how to cry, you can't be good Christians."

VI. Challenge for us in the Year of the Poor and Year of Consecrated Life

Jesus' heart goes out in mercy and compassion and He showed us how to be all-

embracing. He shunned exclusivity and called that sinful because it makes people relegated to the margins of society. These people don't count. If they die of hunger and of diseases, it does not matter. To them we are challenged by the Pope to open our hearts and hands. The poor challenges us. As consecrated religious in this Year of the Poor, how do we answer the call of the poor, the lost, the last and left over in society?

We Benedictines are known for our hospitality. Thank God for that! We show hospitality to those who come to knock at our doors. It requires from us also to go out of our doors to those who are hurting, to go where they are and enjoy *their* hospitality. Sometimes it requires getting down into the trenches in some dark corners of the world and getting our hands dirty, but in doing so, we may come away smelling not of its pleasant fragrance, but rather of other more pungent odors. But, that's okay. It's the way it's supposed to be. As the Pope reminded us in that Holy Chrism homily "A shepherd should smell like sheep."

Christ's followers understand that shepherds should smell like sheep. Our shoes and sandals should be caked with their mud and their mess. Our skin ought to bear the scratches and the dryness of exposure to wind, sun, and rain in the fields, the mountains as well as the hot makeshift dwellings of the urban poor and calamity survivors. We belong among the people to such an extent that they can be called on to honestly testify that our lives as messengers commend the message. We should be so frequently among them that we smell like them, that we smell like their real lives, sometimes fragrant but more often sweaty, musty, offensive, begrimed from battle with a globalized consumerist world, reducing people into commodities.

Will we smell like sheep? I hope so, for I think, in the end, it will be by that smell – a good and fragrant smell to a Savior adored by shepherds in an animal shed, who awaits us as the Lamb of God – that Jesus our Good Shepherd will know us as his own and gather us to his side.

Guide Questions:

1. All of us have gone through exposure-immersion one time or another. Share in your group on how this experience has "formed your heart"?
2. In March 3, 2015, the *Twitter@Pontifex* reads, "Beware of getting too comfortable! When we are comfortable, it's easy to forget other people." How would you respond to this if you will twit/email the Pope?

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