

CREATIVE CONCRETIZATION OF OUR OPTION FOR THE POOR

By: Sr. M. Celine Saplala, OSB

INTRODUCTION

A homily that has stayed in my heart since it was delivered in our chapel some years ago was by the late Abbot Andres Hormilleza, OSB. The Feast was the Solemnity of the Ascension. In explaining the command of Jesus to “Go and make disciples of all nations...”, Abbot Andres recounted the story of Giacomo Puccini, one of the greatest opera composer, an Italian whose works included *La Boheme*, *Tosca*, *Madama Butterfly*.

Puccini died in 1924 leaving his final opera, *Turandot*, unfinished. The last two scenes were completed by Franco Alfano based on the composer's sketches. Arturo Toscanini conducted the premiere performance in April 25, 1926 in front of a sold-out crowd, with every prominent Italian except for Benito Mussolini in attendance. The performance reached the point where Puccini had completed the score, at which time Toscanini stopped the orchestra. The conductor turned to the audience and said: "Here the opera finishes, because at this point the Maestro died." Some record that then Toscanini picked up the baton, turned to the audience, and announced, "But his disciples finished his work." At which time the opera closed to thunderous applause.

Turning to the feast of the Ascension, Abbot Andres explained that the work of Jesus was unfinished, much like the opera *Turandot* when Puccini died in 1924. At the Ascension, Jesus the Master has gone back to the Father and left the task of bringing the good news to His disciples to be continued.

“Thus far the Master’s work.” It is now the age and time for the followers to take up the work and finish the masterpiece.

PROCLAIMING THE KINGDOM

Our Lord Jesus Christ sent his disciples to proclaim the Good News to the world. The disciples were a small band who were called to be witnesses of Jesus of Nazareth, his earthly life, his teaching, his death and above all his resurrection. (cf. Acts 1:22) Transformed by the gift of the Spirit, the disciples went out into the then-known world to spread the “Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mk:1:1). Their proclamation reached the Mediterranean area, Europe, Africa and Asia. Guided by the spirit who is bestowed by the Father and the Son, their successors continued their mission, which remains “in season” until the end of the ages. As long as she exists in this world, the Church must proclaim the Gospel of the coming of the Kingdom of God, the teaching of her Master and Lord and, above all, the person of Jesus Christ. (Preface, LINEAMENTA, 2).

In the Social Awareness sessions that our former Prioress, Mother Mary John gave to all communities not so long ago, she explained that at the heart of our priory thrust of Justice and

Social Transformation which we have been trying to implement since the Chapter of 1975, is the Gospel mandate of Integral Salvation and Integral Evangelization

With the coming of Jesus, the Lamb of God, He wanted to continue what the chosen people experienced in the Exodus. This singular experience in the life of the Israelites revealed to them that their God was a living God who listened to their cries, was close to them and intervened in their lives, unlike the gods of the heathens. Their God is a liberating God because He frees his people from their sufferings (Ex. 3:7-10) through intermediaries like the leaders of Israel: the Judges, the prophets who guided and reminded them to be faithful to their covenant with Yahweh. Theirs is a provident and caring God who provided them manna to eat (Ex. 16:1 ff.), water to drink (Ex 17:1 ff.), protection against enemies (Ex 17:8-15), presence among his people by day (Ex. 14:24); by night (Ex. 14:24). Israel's God is one and Holy; a powerful God who defended the poor and the weak against Pharaoh (Ex. 1:11), who brought them out of Egypt, passing through the Red Sea dry shod.

At the start of the so-called public life of Jesus, we see Jesus in the temple, stood up to read and was handed the book of the Prophet Isaiah. What has been written in the account of St. Luke regarding what Jesus read has been called by many theologians as the **programmatic proclamation of Jesus**—

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor,
to proclaim liberty to captives and new sight to the blind,
to free the oppressed
and announce the Lord's year of mercy.” (Lk. 4: 18-19)

That he preached to "the poor," (Matthew 11:5) was one proof our Saviour gave that he was the Messiah and was from God. The Pharisees and Sadducees despised the poor; ancient philosophers neglected them; but the gospel seeks to bless them - to give comfort where it is felt to be needed, and where it will be received with gratitude. Riches fill the mind with pride, with self-complacency, and with a feeling that the gospel is not needed. The poor "feel" their need of some sources of comfort that the world cannot give, and accordingly our Saviour met with his greatest success in preaching the gospel among the poor; and there also, since, "the gospel has shed its richest blessings and its purest joys. It is also one proof that the gospel is true. If it had been of "men," it would have sought the rich and mighty; but it pours contempt on all human greatness, and seeks, like God, to do good to those whom the world overlooks or despises.¹

This is to be the work of Jesus the Master. His mission is the proclamation of the Good News of the kingdom (the Reign of God). “The Kingdom proclaimed by Jesus was an experience of liberation for the poor from sin and its consequences to personal wholeness. At the heart of the Good News is the proclamation of salvation. It is liberation from anything that oppresses people, above all, from sin and the Evil One”.² It is clear from the Scriptures both the Old and New Testaments that

- SALVATION meant liberation of the soul, not only from sin, hell and death but of the whole person and from everything that oppresses and prevents the development to full humanity.

- That INTEGRAL EVANGELIZATION means the proclamation of salvation from everything oppressive to the human person and the development of persons in all their dimensions and ultimately the transformation of society in all its aspects.³

THE OPTION FOR THE POOR

There is no doubt that the mission of Jesus was nothing else but to make more concrete in His person the compassion and love of the Father, to the poor and the most forgotten.

All these past decades, especially after the Second Vatican Council, we have heard and read volumes of writings about the option for the poor. Let us just refresh our minds with some readings that for sure are familiar with you.

“The phrase “OPTION FOR THE POOR” according to the late SSC professor, Mario Bolasco, has become the most controversial religious term since the Protestant Reformation’s “salvation through faith alone.” This observation made by Donal Dorr, author of a recent study on Vatican social teaching, is paradoxical since this option has deeply and bitterly divided a Church whose mission is precisely of praxis which particularly unsettles the mighty in their thrones.”⁴

And yet, this is an essential option of Christian faith, an obligatory choice in following the life of Jesus because the poor and needy bear the privileged presence of Christ. Donal Dorr goes further to explain that this option is made up of “...a series of choices, personal or communal, made by individuals, by communities, or even by corporate entities such as religious congregation, a diocese, or a Church. *It is the choice to disentangle themselves from serving the interests of those at the ‘top’ of society and to begin instead to come into solidarity with those at or near the bottom through experiencing their lives, sorrows, joys, hopes, and fears.*⁵ (*italics mine*)

“Option for the Poor is making the problems of the poor and their struggles ours”, states Gustavo Gutierrez, for “...the hungry nations of the world cry out to the peoples blessed with abundance. And the Church, cut to the quick by this cry, asks each and every man to hear his brother's plea and answer it lovingly,” declares Pope Paul VI.⁶

Pope Paul writes further, “He who has the goods of this world and sees his brother in need and closes his heart to him, how does the love of God abide in him?” Everyone knows that the Fathers of the Church laid down the duty of the rich toward the poor in no uncertain terms. As St. Ambrose put it: “You are not making a gift of what is yours to the poor man, but you are giving him back what is his. You have been appropriating things that are meant to be for the common use of everyone. The earth belongs to everyone, not to the rich.”⁷

Monastics do not have the luxury of identifying with the dominant power. Benedictines are challenged to move out of our comfort zones and be touched by the pain of the marginalized. Our awareness must be grounded in vulnerability and a willingness to journey with the oppressed, letting their cries of despair and anguish pierce our hearts.⁸

The Second Vatican Council document, taking the joys and sorrows of the poor, declares: “Therefore everyone has the right to possess a sufficient amount of the earth's goods for themselves and their family. This has been the opinion of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church, who taught that people are bound to come to the aid of the poor and to do so not merely out of their superfluous goods. Persons in extreme necessity are entitled to take what they need from the riches of others”.⁹

“Love for others, and in the first place love for the poor, in whom the Church sees Christ himself, is made concrete in the promotion of justice.”¹⁰

Key insights have developed throughout the Church's social teaching. The first and basic insight is that each person has an essential human *dignity*, which is God-given and immutable. This leads to the Church's significant support for human rights, and the right of individuals to adequate services and employment. The second equally basic insight is the communitarian view that all people must work for the *common good*. This notion implies the just distribution of resources and wealth, and ultimately a preferential option for the poor in social policy.

PROGRAMMATIC PROCLAMATION OF OUR CONGREGATION’S MISSION

How has our Congregation participated in the mission of bringing the good news to the poor?

To proclaim the Gospel is the mandate of Christ Himself—to His disciples and to all of us who have personally encountered Him. As religious, as communities and as a congregation, we are called and sent for mission. “The sense of mission is at the very heart of every form of consecrated life.” (Vita Consecrata, 25a). Mission is a happening of relationships, a dialogue of life. It is an undertaking to the unknown for the sake of peoples, because we have been seized by Christ and want to speak of Him to other people, to the ends of the earth, to “tell the world of His love...”¹¹

Let us try to go through some pages of our congregation history to see how our founder and foremothers responded to the call for mission to the needs of the poor and of people far and near.

BENEDICTINES FOR MISSION From Reichenbach to Kalumburu is the title of a little brown booklet written by Mo. Irene Dabalus, OSB on the occasion of the 100 Years of our Congregation 1885-1985. In 53 pages, she recounts how our Congregation’s experience arose from “the surprising depth of God’s presence, sought and praised by the community and proclaimed through their mission in a marvelous and inexhaustible actuality”. I quote further:

“The tradition of the Benedictine Order is a 1500-year old heritage. Throughout the centuries its inherent quest for God and an absolute following of Christ has enabled it to open up to new climates and new cultures with freshness and vitality. Its Rule of life, marked by prudence and wisdom, has given its followers stability in the common life of prayer and work. Living under the gaze of God they receive the courage to face the challenges presented by every age”.¹²

Seeking God in community under a rule and a superior, the Missionary Benedictine is dedicated to the missionary tasks of the Church, responding to the work of proclaiming the Gospel as follows:

“In carrying out our mission we serve especially where the Gospel is not yet proclaimed or where it is not sufficiently known. We help to build and strengthen Christian communities. In areas where people have become indifferent, we participate in the task of re-evangelization. Whatever be our task, we cooperate in the liberation and integral development of the whole person.”¹³

We see how each priory was established as a response to the needs of the people and the demands of the situation. With great ardour, boldness and daring, yet with utmost care and concern, each foundation concretized the work of bringing the good news to the people most neglected. Not even massive poverty, calamities, persecutions and revolts, World Wars, imprisonment, dictatorial governments, apartheid policies, and militarization could snuff out the life force of the Benedictine monasticism for the work of mission.

“This missionary vitality in the life of the congregation was the dream of Father Andreas Amrhein made real. The dream was not new. It is the same vision of a life of worship and life of service to God’s world which fired Benedict of Nursia and his monks of old to tell God’s saving deeds in their near and far surroundings”.

Towards the end of the booklet, Mother Irene states, “In this hour of history, the Missionary Benedictine Congregation still bears in itself the heroism of its pioneers and the decisiveness of those who chose to liberate the life-giving power of Benedictine monasticism for the work of mission. The same heroism and the same decisiveness are asked of its members today. Moreover, it is asked of them today to live a good deal of openness, in recognition of the signs of the times, with very real self-renunciation. Now more than ever it is imperative for them to heed the injunction of St. Benedict: “Listen.”¹⁴

(Note: Mo. Irene’s little booklet is one precious document needing to be rediscovered and to consider carefully to unearth its inherent riches. In itself the booklet is material for our lectio and or spiritual reading.)

THE MISSIONARY THRUST OF THE MANILA PRIORY

From our beginnings in Moriones, Tondo, our Sisters ministered to the poor while themselves living the poverty of Bethlehem all over again. Even when our pioneers started their first class on December 3, 1906, the number of poor non-paying pupils (50) outnumbered the eight paying students. The sisters “spent their first Christmas with the poor, taking pains to make the day a real feast of Christian charity. Gifts given to them were recycled for the poor.”¹⁵

In the first decades of our foundations, our sisters spent vacation periods for apostolic activities. What begun in 1906 became an established tradition all throughout the ensuing years as the sisters lived their life in community and missionary endeavors. They went out on foot or riding on carabaos’ back, going to lonely little places and villages; our sisters climbed mountains, visited the sick, taught catechism and prepared the people for the visit of the priest

who was able to come only once a year as a rule. Through the years, not only our sisters but also their school people and children and lay partners conducted such activities, thus instilling in them the importance of ministering to the poor.

This consciousness of reaching out to the least of God's children found further expression in Priory Chapters and other official documents. The Priory Chapter of 1980 responded to the situation of poverty, moral decline, and the political constraints as a "call to be in solidarity with the poor and to participate in bringing about the Good News of our liberation and the restoration of our God-given dignity as a people."

This declaration is a further affirmation of what is spelled out in our CONSTITUTIONS, p. 30: "The love of Christ impels us, above all, to be in solidarity with the poor and the oppressed and to have an open heart for their needs."

In the Priory Chapter of 1986, the delegates had in mind the exhortation of the 1971 Synod of Bishops:

"Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world are a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation."

Chapter after Priory Chapter, the PREFERENTIAL OPTION FOR THE POOR became the theme and thrust and spelled out clearly in answer to the needs of the People of God on crucial junctions in history and the world at large. As the Priory continues in its commitment to participate in social transformation towards the fulfillment of the Kingdom, we try our utmost in deepening our understanding of mission and in listening with a heart to the cries of God's people.

The recent 18th Manila Priory Chapter urged us to set forth, with joy and hope, towards a "new season of witnessing to our faith. In our mission to "awaken the sense of God" among people, situations and experiences, the **Message** prays,

may "the world of our time, which is searching sometimes with anguish, sometimes with hope, be enabled to receive the Good News, not from evangelizers who are dejected, discouraged, impatient or anxious, but from ministers of the Gospel whose lives glow with fervor, who have first received the joy of Christ, and who are willing to risk their lives so that the Kingdom may be proclaimed and the Church established in the midst of the world." ¹⁶

Furthermore, the *Lineamenta* #5 urges us to a new evangelization; new in its ardour, methods and expressions. New evangelization is "the courage to forge new paths in responding to the changing circumstances and conditions facing the church in her call to proclaim and live the gospel today".

And so we are challenged to continue the work of our founder, our foremothers and the priory's pioneers, together with our elders and *senpectae*, they whose courage, dedication and self sacrificing spirit took up the daily "*dura et aspera*" of monastic life, ever attuned to the voice of the Spirit.

IN CONCLUSION

Dear Sisters, as I set out to reflect on the concrete ways, activities and programs undertaken by our sisters for and with the poor, I did not intend to propose some methods or plans to concretize our option for the poor. Our Chapter documents contain numerous recommendations and guidelines on this topic and have been endorsed to communities and apostolates. It is for me to salute our founder and foremothers for their creativity in bringing the Gospel to distant lands. To them the credit goes. We are most grateful for the trail they have blazed in following the call of the Spirit. May this same Spirit that has led them also inspire us to “continue the work they have begun.”

Let me end with this story:

A Story on Partnership

from (Does God Have a Big Toe?)

Before there was anything, there was God, a few angels, and a huge swirling glob of rocks and water with no place to go. The angels asked God, “Why don’t you clean up this mess?”

So God collected rocks from the huge swirling glob and put them together in clumps and said, “Some of these clumps of rocks will be planets, and some will be stars, and some of these rocks will be...just rocks.”

Then God collected water from the huge swirling glob and put it together in pools of water and said, “Some of these pools of water will be oceans, and some will be clouds, and some of this water will be...just water.”

Then the angels said, “Well, it’s neater now, but is it finished?” And God answered: “NOPE.”

On some rocks God placed growing things, and creeping things, and things only God knows what they are, and when God had done all this, the angels asked God, “Is the world finished now?” And God answered: “NOPE.”

God made a man and a woman from some of the water and dust and said to them, “I am tired now. “Please finish up the world for me...really it’s almost done.” But the man and woman said, “We can’t finish the world alone! You have plans and we are too little.”

“You are big enough,” God answered them. “But I agree to this. If you keep trying to finish the world, I will be your partner.”

The man and woman asked, “What’s a partner?” and God answered, “A partner is someone you work with on a big thing that neither of you can do alone. If you have a partner, it means that you can never give up, because your partner is depending on you. On the days you think I am not doing enough and on the days I think you are not doing enough, even on those days we are still partners and we must not stop trying to finish the world. That’s a deal.” And they all agreed to that deal.

Then the angels asked God, “Is the world finished yet?” God answered, “I don’t know. Go and ask my partners.”

Guide Questions:

1. “A new evangelization is synonymous with mission, requiring the capacity to set out anew, go beyond boundaries and broaden horizons.” Do we take this to mean as “business as usual” and just proceed as we did in the past in my tried and tested way, no matter how successful ?
2. How do I participate in “restoring joy and life to situations imprisoned by fear”? Or is my lack of it so strong that it affects the very tenor of our communities and apostolate?
3. How do I reveal the truth and depth of the gospel in my daily dedication to journey with the poorest of God’s children? Where do I encounter them in my particular assignment/ sphere of work?
4. What corner of my world is the Holy Spirit calling me to renew with justice?

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9. *Gaudium et Spes*, #69
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13. Constitution V, 2
14. *Op.cit.*, Dabalus, OSB, p. 48
15. Sr. Caridad Barrion, OSB. *Missionary Benedictine Sisters in the Philippines, 1885-1960*, p. 62
16. *Lineamenta*, 2012. Quoted in the *MESSAGE Continuing Conversion in Joy and Hope of the 18th Manila Priory Chapter*