
A CHURCH THAT REACHES OUT

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The Church is a community of people called by God who has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ, His Son. Jesus was sent by the Father to announce The Good News of Salvation and the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is present now and the Church which is led by the Holy Spirit looks forward to its fulfillment at the end of time. God's desire proclaimed by Jesus is that those who follow Him understand that their relationship with God is not a private affair, but it is meant to be shared with all peoples everywhere.

Membership in the Church is made concrete through an individual's baptismal mission. The Church is a communion of communities, sustained by the memory of Jesus Christ which has been passed down in an Apostolic Tradition. It embodies the stories and Christian theopraxis of pilgrims in need of redemption. The Church is rooted in the theological conviction and belief that "this body of people, this nation of pilgrims, in and for the world, is a fundamental part of God's plan in history, guided by the Holy Spirit." It is not, therefore, a community of mere well-wishers or a syndicate of the like-minded.

The Church is the sacramental sign of the abiding presence of Christ in the world. It is a community of people whose encounter with Jesus has given them a new identity. The Gospel of St. John explains this new identity in Christ in his narrative of the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus, a member of the Sanhedrin and a Pharisee, who comes secretly to Jesus at night (Jn 3:1-21). Nicodemus desires to understand what it means to be "born again" in order to have a place in the Kingdom of God. Jesus offers him a rather surprising response. Jesuit theologian Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator notes that "Jesus veers off on an elaborate monologue on the flesh and the spirit, earthly and heavenly things, the Son of Man, God's gift of the Son to the world, light and darkness, and so on." How this discourse affected Nicodemus is not known. He probably left more confused. Yet, the story of Nicodemus and Jesus does not end that night. Later in the Gospel, we hear of Nicodemus defending Jesus during the day. "Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus earlier and who was one of their own number, asked, 'Does our law condemn a man without first hearing him to find out what he has been doing?' They replied, 'Are you from Galilee, too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee'" (Jn 7:50- 52). It seems that Nicodemus goes from being a silent

observer of Jesus to a vocal advocate for him; arguably, then, this encounter with Jesus made a deep impression on him. Nicodemus ceased to “walk in fear” –symbolized by his encounter with Jesus at night–and embraced the light of the day –symbolized by his defense of Jesus during the day. At Jesus’ death his closest associates abandon him, but who appears in the Passion narrative?: Nicodemus, the one who brings the mixture of myrrh and aloes for anointing Jesus’ body for burial (Jn 19:39-42). Orobator concludes, “Nicodemus is the model of a believer seeking a deeper understanding of his or her faith.” Nicodemus represents all those who find that Jesus offers something unique and decide to make room in their life for what this new and transforming discovery offers. A new identity and outlook are born from encounter with Jesus.

In reading the New Testament, we learn that no person who encounters Jesus leaves Him unchanged. For whatever the reason a new way of life is born; serious encounter with Christ changes person radically. It is not an exaggeration to say that throughout the Gospels no one who comes to Christ goes away unchanged! Examples abound. Recall that the magi, after paying homage to the child Jesus, were warned in a dream not to approach King Herod again, but to return to their countries by way of different route (Mt 2:12). Or think of Jesus’ encounters with Levi or Zacchaeus or the Samaritan Woman or the Rich Young Man (who went away sad), the woman caught in adultery, and the thief on the cross and others. Each of them went from Jesus changed in some fashion. The greater part of the New Testament is dominated by Paul (Saul of Tarsus) whose encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus changed him into the Apostle to the Gentiles.

Like Jesus, the Church has a mandate to be a community of real human encounter. The “way” of Jesus challenges the Church to listen to and to accompany everyone, while, at the same time paying special attention to those who suffer in our societies. It urges us to go out into the streets of the existential peripheries to heal the “refugees and migrants, displaced persons and victims of trafficking, to whom the Lord wants His love to be manifested and His salvation to be announced.” Pope Francis has invited Catholics to be members of a Church that takes risks and is ready to make mistakes as we engage the world, especially the discarded of our world. He encourages the fostering of a culture of encounter with the desire to promote honest dialogue, by listening, and with readiness to confront challenges and disagreements. Francis invites the Church “to work for ‘the culture of encounter,’ in a simple way, ‘as Jesus did’: not just seeing, but looking; not just hearing, but listening; not just passing people by, but stopping with them; not just saying ‘what a shame, poor people!’ but allowing yourself to be moved with compassion; ‘and then to draw near, to touch and to say: ‘Do not weep’ and to give at least a drop of life.” In other words, it is less a Church if it does not engage and

transform the world around it. It must be a Church that fosters an encounter with the other, and as Emmanuel Levinas opines, "... this encounter is rooted in the ultimate alterity of the other, with acceptance even to suffer in response to the suffering of the other and an awakening of "one's feeling of one's responsibility for and to the other."

A Church of real human encounter challenges us to realize that while it may be good to act like Simon of Cyrene (Mk 15: 21), to help Jesus carry the cross and while it may be wonderful to be a Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), these are not enough. Simon of Cyrene and the Good Samaritan did excellent good deeds in individual situations. However, we are called by our encounter with Jesus not to just do individual acts of goodness but to make our voices heard and to confront authorities about the injustice in our societies, and to make the road to Jericho safe from robbers and hoodlums. We should cry loudly that it is not acceptable for people to remain poor and beaten, to remain refugees, migrants and displaced. This means that showing compassion for them without "showing concern for the structures of society that make them objects of compassion is to be sentimental rather than loving." It is important to show compassion, but it is not enough. A Church of real human encounter acts as a first responder. It runs into the burning building, and not away from it. The Church needs people who heal the wounds of God's people. It does not need those who make the wounds bigger.

There is a beautiful story that illustrates what a Church of real human encounter ought to look like. Many years ago in Scotland, there was a British aristocrat who was running to London for an important session of the parliament. And his automobile got mired in the mud on this country road and he was desperate. There was no Triple AAA or no one to help him. He thought he was going to fail to get to London for the very crucial vote that was planned. When suddenly this Scottish farm boy appeared with a yoke of Oxen and goes over and pulls his car out and saves the day. The man was so grateful. He wanted to reward that farm boy. He said, surely, there is something I can do for you. But the young boy said: "no, I am very happy to be of service, Sir." But certainly you must have some dreams. Something that you really wanted in your life. And the boy laughed: "Oh, Yes, I always wanted to be a doctor. He said, but that is beyond the realm of possibilities." That man returned to London. He thought about how he could reward that boy. He put the boy in contact with a school that he had arranged for the boy to have a scholarship. And that boy went and studied.

Many years later, during the worst part of the Second World War, Winston Churchill was dying of Influenza. That is when he was the British Prime Minister (1940-1945). They saved his life with a miracle drug called Penicillin that had been discovered by

Fleming who was the farm boy who had received the scholarship from the man who was Churchill's father.

"Acts of love have ripple effect and can profoundly change human ecology. Our task is to build a civilization of love or there will be no civilization at all," says Seán Cardinal O'Malley. As we celebrate this World Day of Migrants and Refugees, I invite you to do more of these acts of love with and for them because among them we have untapped "Fleming" potentials. If we continue to love and encounter them, that will indicate profoundly what it means to be human and to be Church, to offer hope, to turn their sorrows into joy, and their dreams into opportunities.

As I conclude this reflection, I pray that as God's people, we open our hearts to the plea of so many who knock at our door. I am reminded of the following words: "Behold! I am standing and knocking at your door. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in and we will eat together" (Revelation 3:20). We say people who eat together do not eat one another. Amen.

