

Leonardo Emberti Gialloreti
Community of Sant'Egidio
Jyväskylä, February 13th, 2015

“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Mt 4, 4).

It is a joy for me to find myself together with you in these days of prayer and reflection. Every one of us needs it. Also Jesus knew that, especially in difficult times, it was good for the disciples to share with him a moment of friendship: They had things to tell him, experiences to share with him and He himself had many things to say. The inner life of the Christian whatever his/her ministry may be in the Church, whatever his/her culture, is always that of a disciple. A Christian, even if called to teach others, remains inside always someone who needs to learn daily from his Lord and from the pages of the Scriptures.

And here we are. We are far away from the impending rhythms and obligations of our ordinary life. In fact, we live in a world where people never have time. If you ask somebody “how are you?”, the usual answer is “I am busy!”. Especially in the church! So, this is a time to rest, but, at the same time, this is an occasion to question ourselves about our lives and about the mission of the Church.

I think we should seriously reflect, facing a suffering world, what it means to be Christians today. Is it enough what we have done until today, or shouldn't we ask ourselves if something more could be done? Who are we, the Christians today? Which is our role in this world, in this society? Are we a soul in this world? Are we salt for this world? Or, the salt has lost its taste?

So, let us ask some questions together. Throughout the whole history, men and women have continuously asked themselves: How and where can I find God in my life? Where can I meet Jesus? In a nice building? In a well-organized NGO? In my own feelings? The present Bishop of Rome, Pope Francis, has sometimes ago asked this very questions to the priests of the City of Rome. He asked them: “If we are looking for Jesus, where can we find him? We have to turn our gaze to Jesus as he goes about the cities and villages. And this is curious. Where was Jesus most often, where could he most easily be found? On the road. He might have seemed to be homeless, because he was always on the road. Jesus' life was on the road. He especially invites us to grasp the depths of his heart, what he feels for the crowds, for the people he encounters: that interior attitude of

compassion. In another text Pope Francis added: "We need to avoid the spiritual sickness of a Church that is wrapped up in its own world: when a Church becomes like this, it grows sick. It is true that going out onto the street implies the risk of accidents happening, as they would to any ordinary man or woman. But, if the Church stays wrapped up in itself, it will age. And if I had to choose between a wounded Church that goes out onto the streets and a sick withdrawn Church, I would definitely choose the first one." This are the words of Pope Francis.

If somebody of you has been to Rome, you will know that one of the great Roman Basilicas is called "St. Paul outside the walls". Outside the walls: This is an important point. The church cannot live only "inside" its walls, inside its structure, inside its activities, inside its timetable, inside its internal discussions and quarrels. No, the church has to be outside the walls and reach out to all those who are outside. Outside because they are poor, because they are foreign, because they are sick, because they are old.

This was also the call that a small group of secondary school students heard in 1968 in Rome. In that year the Community of Sant'Agidio began. 1968: Those were difficult, but also fascinating years. In Europe 1968 - as you all know very well - was at the origin of a great change in the consciences of younger people. But, for these high school students, the 1968 met with an important fact: The discovery of the Gospel. Reading the Gospel saved us from an ideological approach to reality. To come in touch with the Gospel meant to come in touch with the real, authentic world.

So, from the Gospel another discovery came: the discovery of the poor. Yes, the Gospel sent us to the poor of our city. Rome, the city of wealth, the centre of the Catholic Church, the centre of Italy, the centre of the Mediterranean, was - in fact - a city, which was full of poor. But, they were hidden. For us solidarity with the poor did not imply the desire to become a substitute of the institutions, but to live, simply, beside the poor, to consider them our friends, our brother and sisters, our relatives. Throughout the years, we then discovered a new form of poverty, which existed also among the rich: The poverty created by loneliness. If somebody, notwithstanding his wellbeing, is alone, he is poor. This happened, for example, in the institutions where many old people were living alone, even though they received all kind of services. We understood that the disciples of Jesus have to reach to loneliness, so to transform loneliness in closeness.

So, the Gospel and the poor. Every Community of Sant'Agidino, however small it may be, is characterised by its listening to the Gospel and by its solidarity towards the poor. This solidarity becomes real through the personal, daily, meeting with many poor men and women.

Years have passed. Today Sant'Agidino has 60.000 members in 75 countries. Despite our many limits and weaknesses, listening to the Scripture remains the centre of our fraternity among us and with the poor. The men and women of Sant'Agidino, leading an ordinary life ó with our jobs, house, family, children ó every evening gather to listen to the Word of God, which is preached everywhere, where the Community meets.

Today the Community of Sant'Agidino has become a complex reality, but at the same time it is extremely simple. Our only resources are the poor human energies each one of us has, made fruitful by the meeting with the Gospel. We believe it is possible to serve dreams greater than ourselves even with poor or small means. The only strength is in the prayer held every evening. We tried to remain faithful to this prayer and to the listening to the word of God during all these years. This is where our strength comes from.

Thanks to this strength, all over the world the people of the Community of Sant'Agidino are friends with the poor. For us, the poor are not social cases or clients of our actions. We consider them our friends, as if they were our relatives. And doesn't Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew speak about the prisoners, the naked, the hungry as his little brothers? They are relatives of Jesus, they are our relatives. This family relationship is experienced in friendship, in a personal way, but also with concrete support, as we would do with an old friend or a family member. Our service to the poor is not anonymous. We call the poor by name. The name is not something secondary. To remember the name means the end of the anonymity for the poor: It means to recognize that he/she is something more than a body to be nourished and to be taken care of. Actually, without name, the body is half-alive. To be called by name means that I still exist for someone.

Why am I stressing this aspect of the name? You know the story in Luke 16, 19-31, in which the evangelist recounts the parable of ãa rich man, who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day, and who was leading the good lifeö. This rich man was so content that he failed to realize that Lazarus lay at the door of his home covered in sores: a poor homeless man. Lazarus lay there, hungry, and he ate only what fell from the rich man's table: crumbs. What is curious in this text is that the rich man has no name, while the poor man has a name: Lazarus. This

is exact the opposite of the logic of our world, where rich people are well-known by everybody, while nobody knows the names of the poor. Our mission, as Christians, is to give back a name to everybody. Millions of people live in our world, whose name does not mean anything for anybody.

The 27th of October 2004 a black man condemned to death was executed in Texas. His name was Dominique Green. For 15 years, while he was in prison, he has been a close friend of many people of our community. He has been the first condemned to death to become friend of our community. After him, hundreds and hundreds of friendships with condemned to death developed. But he was the first one. His name means something for all the members of our communities all over the world. It was the personal friendship with Dominique, with one single person, which opened us the doors to the suffering of all condemned to death. One person, one name, opens up to the whole world. Why to stop in front of one name, while the world is so full of suffering people? But, if we do not stop in front of one person, we will not be able to stop in front of a suffering world.

This is, according to me, an important point. Because very often we, even if we are Christians, we flee in front of a personal relation, a personal commitment, with a poor person. May be we say: "I am already paying my taxes. So, I am already helping the poor. It is the state, or the social services of the church, which have to take care of the poor. Why should I have a personal relation to them?" The state should offer its social services, and that is good. But for a Christian the relation with the poor is not a social issue. It is a spiritual issue. Our communities our parishes should be a place of clean air, because of their gratuitous love for the poor. Love for the poor is really the expression of the gratuitous nature of Christian living. The poor have nothing to give in return. They cannot invite us in turn to their comfortable houses.

Here I am not talking about inventing new programmes for our parishes. The programme already exists. It is the one we find in the Gospel. It is the one centred on Christ himself. From there we receive a power that is greater than our reasoning, greater than our resignation, greater than our programmes. The Christian is someone, as Martin Luther King once said, who is familiar with the power of love. In our weakness, in our weak body, in our ageing body, an ability to love is born.

Sometimes the Christians have the feeling to be people of the past, to be old-timers. In front of this world - where the important things are internet, money, success, wealth, power - Christians are sometimes very shy. They are afraid of saying that "the man does not live only from bread". They are afraid of speaking of things, which seem to be old, which are no more suited for the modern

world, for the young generations. But, Christians are not people of the past. No, Christians are the people of the future. It doesn't matter which is your age, if you are young or old. If you are a disciple of Christ you already belong to the people of the future.

Yes, Christians have a wide, but also an exciting future in front of them. And we know, as a great Russian orthodox priest - Alexandr Menø killed in 1990 - said: "Christianity is not yet fulfilled [í] The past 2000 years of history were only the first few shy steps of Christianity. We still do not understand many words of Christ. Christianity is just beginning." Yes, Christianity is just beginning. And we thank the Lord that He called all of us to be part of this beginning of Christianity.