

## LIFE AND WELL-BEING CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

## ASCENSION SUNDAY

## A revolution towards plenitude

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Today's readings: Acts 1: 1-11; Psalm 47:2-3, 6-7, 8-9; Ephesians 1:17-23; Matthew 28:16-20

In *El Evangelio en Solentiname* (1979), Ernesto Cardenal (1925-2020), a former member of the Sandinista Liberation Front in Nicaragua and later a revolutionary priest who was suspended from priestly ministry in 1984 for his political activism as minister of culture, speaks of the spreading of the Gospel in terms of a revolution.

*El Evangelio en Solentiname* is a collection of dialogic 'homilies' on the Sunday Gospels. Sunday mass on the Solentiname Islands, where Cardenal founded a lay 'monastic' community made up mainly of peasants, was celebrated either in a church building or in the countryside, there where the majority didn't practise for reasons varying from political ideology, disenchantment, fear of the regime, or also because Cardenal's community didn't match the traditional devotional features of religious practice. 'Homilies' took the form of a dialogic verse to verse commentary on the gospel of the day, "in a relaxed and spontaneous atmosphere", sitting at the altar,

sometimes even smoking a cigarette to help those present calm down from a tense, hostile social context.

Undoubtedly, Cardenal's monastic formation, under the mentorship of Thomas Mer-ton, and later on, his experience with Latin American priests, taught him the intrinsic value of ecclesial communion, which is born out of the readiness to share one's experience of the risen Christ and to listen to one's brothers and sisters. The Church is rooted in the communion of the Triune God in whose name Jesus instructs his disciples to baptise whoever comes to faith.

There is a revolutionary power in the Gospel for the building of God's reign in this world. Cardenal saw himself as a revolutionary without retaliation for God's reign, walking in the footsteps of Jesus, who in today's gospel is revered by the disciples as Sovereign, having "all authority in heaven and earth". On the mount in Galilee, the Risen Christ brings to completion what he had started on the Mount of the Beatitudes and the Mount of the Transfiguration. It is from Galilee that the disciples were summoned to faith by Jesus himself, and now it is from Galilee that they are sent on a mission to announce the Good News to subvert earthly powers and structures, transforming the world and freeing it to welcome God's reign.

Cardenal and liberation theologians remind us that it is very dangerous for the Christian community to exile the risen Christ in heaven, relegating him to the afterlife, and

neutering his revolutionary power, which has the capacity of changing the world for good. Jesus himself assures his disciples that he is always with them "until the end of times". He is ever present, at the forefront, leading his disciples in the work of redemption and salvation.

There is indeed politics in the Good News, as there are beliefs and principles forming a particular world view on how world structures should be life-giving, promoters of justice, heralds of long-lasting harmony and peace. From a Christian perspective there is only one way for this to become a reality: allowing ourselves to be enveloped by the mystery of God, as Jesus and the disciples were symbolically overshadowed by the cloud which appears both in Luke's account of the Ascension as well as in that of the Transfiguration. In Cardenal's words, "the cloud is something which is visible but which also hides. It is the image of God, who reveals himself and at the same time remains hidden from us. Rather, God is revealed to us as a mystery; God's presence is a void, and God's being is nothing to the senses."

This is why, in today's second reading, the apostle wishes to his community in Ephesus, that God might bestow her with wisdom, clarity of vision and openness of heart to complete in everyone, from the here and now, that plenitude, which is already present in Jesus Christ, the head of his body the Church.

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## Spiritual guidance

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... so that he may forgive your sins. You go to your spiritual director to tell him the things that are going on in your heart, your spiritual emotions, your joys, your anger, and what is going on inside you."

Spiritual direction or accompaniment can be carried out not just by a priest or a religious but by a lay person who has been trained in the art of spiritual direction, and who has the charism of helping another person's relationship with God. The guide or companion accompanies the retreatant through his or her spiritual journey.

Throughout the process of spiritual direction, the retreatant is allowed to reflect, read, pray, as well as a time to meet privately with the guide to discuss what is happening in the times of spiritual reflection. The guide's role is not to direct the retreatant into some kind of formal preset pattern but only to co-discern the various movements retreatant is deeply experiencing to whatever activity God is motioning.

Sharing with a spiritual director helps retreatants be more objective and moves them to reflect on what is making and giving



Spiritual direction or accompaniment can be carried out by a priest or a trained lay person. PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

value in their life in the context of their relationship with God.

Spiritual direction helps a person to talk and listen to God. In spiritual direction, the individual is helped to grow in his or her intimacy with God and to live out the consequences of that relationship. Spiritual direction is a process of interiorisation because it implies letting God, who dwells within us, to draw us deeper towards himself.

In Pope Francis's apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel), he encourages all to be involved in spiritual direction. The pope writes about the need for everyone to be initiated into the "art of

accompaniment" which teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other.

In the words of Thomas Mer-ton, the whole purpose of spiritual direction is to penetrate beneath the surface of our life, to get behind the façade of conventional gestures and attitudes that we present to the world, and to bring out our inner spiritual freedom, our inmost truth, which is what we call the likeness of Christ in his soul.

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## QUOTES &amp; NEWS

## Family-friendly

Pope Francis tweeted on May 15 that "the family is the main antidote to material and spiritual poverty, and to the problem of the demographic winter", adding that "family-friendly social, economic and cultural policies need to be promoted in every country, as well as policies that welcome life."

## See Christ's face

Eight bishops from American dioceses bordering with Mexico called for compassion for migrants in need: "We are called to see the face of Christ in those who suffer, those who lack the basic necessities of life, and we judge ourselves as a community of faith by the way we treat the most vulnerable. We always cooperate in the administration of humanitarian aid with local, state and federal officials, frequently in partnership with faith communities and like-minded secular organisations. May each of us be blessed with a humanitarian heart that beats with fraternal compassion for those in need."

## G7: Cancel debt

Catholic bishops representing 23 countries in Africa appealed to G7 leaders meeting in Hiroshima, Japan, to support African countries that are struggling with poverty, including the possibility of cancelling debts the bishops term as "unpayable". "We urge the G7 to take bold action to support Africa in this time of need, including debt cancellation, increased aid, and fairer trade policies. Last year, over 300m people experienced food insecurity, exacerbating drivers of conflict and social tension in many African countries and making governance more fragile," they said.

## On the Spirit

In his May 14 *Regina Coeli* address, the pope said: "Let us ask: Do we call on the Holy Spirit? Do we pray to him often? Let us not forget about the one who is close to us, or rather, is within us! Do we listen to his voice, both when he encourages us and when he corrects us? Do we remember we are beloved children of God?"

(Compiled by Fr Joe Borg)