

LIFE AND WELL-BEING CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

23RD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Restoring the human community

FR CHARLÓ
CAMILLERI
O.C.A.R.M.

Today's readings: Ezekiel 33:7-9; Psalm 95:1-2, 6-7, 8-9; Romans 13:8-10; Matthew 18:15-20

In *Patmos*, Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843) the German Romanticist poet and philosopher, reflects on the Jesus story, focusing on his absence, the disciples scattering, and the awaiting for his return as experienced by those who knew him in flesh and blood. In the ninth stanza of the poem, Hölderlin evokes the Emmaus story as well as Jesus's promise in today's Gospel: "where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

Amid grief, confusion, and the scattering of people, "the divine spirit was twice recognised, in unity", writes Hölderlin. Scholars note that one thing which possibly perplexed Hölderlin throughout his life was "the irrevocable divide that occurred at the dawn of the ancient world and deprived humanity of the proximity it enjoyed with the gods".

In Hölderlin, this perplexity was an extended sense of grief haunting him since infancy: a twice orphaned boy, he was

pressured to pursue a Lutheran ecclesiastical career. He attributes to Christianity this irrevocable divide. Indeed, belief in the Incarnation brought down the separation between the sacred and the profane.

As a Romanticist, acquainted among others with Goethe, Schiller, Hegel and Shelling, he was nostalgic for Greek mythology and highly influenced by the ancient Greek poets. Disillusioned with the aftermaths of the French Revolution and diffident of politics, Hölderlin never really stopped envisaging a future where the ancient gods and Christian faith might merge into a renewed form of spirituality aspiring to the unity of all things, of reason and nature, in the desperate attempt to come to terms with the tragedy of human mortality. For his views he was also suspected of syncretism and pantheism.

Suffering from schizophrenia and deemed as incurable with only three remaining years to live, he spent the last phase of his life at a carpenter's home in Tübingen, where he was taken care of for 36 years. Abandoned to his fate by acquaintances and family, Hölderlin was ultimately 'saved' by a humane act, which can be seen also as a seed of Christian charity. In the cultivation of humane relationships, that is where we really gather in Jesus' name. Healthy humane relationships keep us on track and provide us with a safe space protecting us from allowing ourselves to be led astray.

It is in the midst of our healthy, natural, humane relationships that the living Jesus Christ is ever present; it is in humane encounters that the divine countenance is revealed. In today's second reading, the Apostle Paul reminds us of what is pivotal in our faith, our one and only obligation in matters of coexistence: "Owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law" as "love does no evil". Ultimately, no god, no ideology, no political or religious system, and no vigorous activism for social change will save us if it does not lead to a healthy, meaningful communion with others.

Creeds and beliefs, spiritual endeavours and practices are worth nothing if they do not usher us to become more humane promoters of communion and reconciliation. This is the scandalous Christian mystery of proclaiming God's Incarnation among us. For those within the ecclesial communion who still cannot comprehend this, wasting their life and others' in irrelevant, stifling religious minutiae and dead human traditions, Jesus instructs us to treat them, "as you would a Gentile or a tax collector". That is to say, treat them as someone who is not yet evangelised and who still needs to be handled the way Jesus himself dealt with Gentiles and the tax collectors. Ultimately, disciples are sent to build and restore the human community, not church buildings.

CHARLO.CAMILLERI@UM.EDU.MT

Loss of priests, vocations

FR FRANKIE
CINI

The death of four priests in one week in Malta in the final days of August created ripples in the Maltese Catholic Church. Gozo was also recently marked by the loss of several well-loved priests.

To date, in 2023, 12 priests have died in Malta, and five in Gozo. This is not an insignificant number. Some were missionaries who had spent most of their lives in service abroad. Others were much loved pastors, walking in faith with their entrusted communities. Some were gentle, quiet presences among their religious communities. Others provided the much-needed strident voice of prophecy to the Church. Some dedicated much of their time and ministry to social justice issues, research, and the mentoring of other younger priests.

To borrow from the African adage "when an old man dies a

whole library burns". In much the same way, the death of priests is a deep loss for the community of believers and for society in general.

A number of relatively younger priests have also decided to leave the ministerial priesthood in the last few months. For the communities that witnessed the departure of their shepherds, this was akin to the loss of a priest through death, and the feelings of grief and anguish were just as powerful.

It is heartening to see former priests involved in Church-related initiatives, albeit in different roles. Some have been employed in aspects of the Church's mission, while others remain active participants in the life of the Christian community. The years of formation, academic training, and invaluable pastoral experience they had gained in their years of priesthood are thus not lost.

Next Sunday, September 17, marks the 90th anniversary of the death of the Servant of God, Mgr Joseph De Piro. He died in 1933, at the age of 56, at a time when he was director of no less than six children's

homes, apart from many other ministries, including the foundation of the Missionary Society of St Paul (MSSP). His death was sudden, premature, and deeply felt. In 1933 Gozitan poet George Pisani described De Piro's loss as a moment when all the children living in Church institutes mirrored the whole nation in feeling orphaned.

It is no different today. We also feel orphaned and bereft with the loss of priests. In such moments the temptation is to turn inwards, into the dangerous self-absorption of cynicism and lack of hope.

Pope Francis has often addressed this issue in the face of the declining numbers of vocations in many parts of the world: In a video message to the Confederation of Latin American and Caribbean Religious in August 2021, the pope said: "Renounce the criterion of numbers: otherwise it can turn you into fearful disciples, trapped in the past and giving into nostalgia. Instead of focusing on numbers... focus on evangelisation and leave the rest to the Holy Spirit. I would like to remind you that joy, the



Some younger priests have also left the priesthood in the last few months. PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

highest expression of life in Christ, is the greatest witness we can offer the holy people of God whom we are called to serve and accompany on their pilgrimage toward the encounter with the Father."

These words of trust by Pope Francis echo those of Jesus: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom" (Lk 12:32). Even as we honour and witness to our grief, when we are bowed down with sorrow, we reaffirm our faith in God's unwavering faithfulness to us, even in ways we do not yet understand.

FCINI@HOTMAIL.COM

QUOTES & NEWS

Answer to thirst

In his mass homily last Sunday, during his pilgrimage to Mongolia, Pope Francis spoke about Psalm 63: "My soul is thirsting for you, O Lord my God. We are that dry land thirsting for fresh water, water that can slake our deepest thirst. Our hearts long to discover the secret of true joy, a joy that even during existential aridity, can accompany and sustain us. But more than anything, we thirst for love, for only love can truly satisfy us, bring us fulfilment, inspire inner assurance and allow us to savour the beauty of life."

The Christian faith is the answer to this thirst; it takes it seriously, without dismissing it or trying to replace it with tranquilisers or surrogates."

In silent adoration

In his address to the clergy and religious in Mongolia on September 2, the pope emphasised the importance of Eucharistic adoration, from which authentic apostolic activity springs.

"When we remain in contact with the face of Christ, seeking him in the Scriptures and contemplating him in silent adoration before the tabernacle, we come to see him in the faces of those we serve and experience an interior joy that, even amid hardship, brings peace to our hearts."

Evil of corruption

In his address to civil authorities of Mongolia, Pope Francis spoke, among other things, of corruption:

"I think of the threat represented by the consumerist spirit that nowadays, in addition to creating great injustices, leads to an individualistic mindset that cares little for others and for sound established traditions. When religions remain grounded in their original spiritual patrimony, ...they also represent a safeguard against the insidious threat of corruption, which effectively represents a serious menace to the development of any human community; corruption is the fruit of a utilitarian and unscrupulous mentality that has impoverished whole countries.

"Corruption... is a sign of a vision that fails to look up to the sky and flees the vast horizons of fraternity, becoming instead self-enclosed and concerned with its own interests alone."

(Compiled by Fr Joe Borg)