

II. Being MSC in the post-modern world

(11:30 – 12:10 Tuesday May 2, 2006)

I begin by quoting from the Constitutions that helped form most of us in the years before Vatican II. No 6 in the Chapter on the Spirit of the Society reads:

It is evident that the entire life of the members of the Society must be so ordered as to be distinguished and characterised, as by its own proper mark, by a sincere and ever-burning love for the Heart of the Word Incarnate. This love must be, as it were, the seal of their holiness, and compel them to clothe themselves most ardently with the sentiments of that same Sacred Heart.

Our ministry continues that of those who have gone before us. We constantly experience in our ministry the gratitude of people who tell us that the charism we bring to them is wonderful, liberating, meaningful. To the extent that we find ourselves continuing to witness to this MSC charism, we know that it is because we have been nurtured in the tradition that invited us to catch ‘a sincere and ever-burning love for the Heart of the Word Incarnate’, and to ‘clothe ourselves in the sentiments of that same Sacred Heart.’ It is this focus on the heart (the heart of Jesus, the heart of God, the heart of people, the heart of the world), and this conviction that the heart is not only sacred but ‘incarnate’ in the flesh of people’s real lives that makes our charism so attractive. It is also a charism that attracts those who have grown up in what we are calling the ‘post-modern’ world. This gives an ‘awesome’ value to our ‘Catholic’ mission. If we are to continue offering it – and we are committed to do so – we must continue to dare the inner journey into the heart of Jesus. If our life makes us ‘too busy’ for this, we would do well to look at the Japanese kangri for ‘too busy’: one element translates as ‘heart’, the other as ‘destruction!’

No 8 of the pre-Vatican MSC Constitutions reads:

Nothing will be dearer to them than to persuade people that the yoke of our most loving Saviour is sweet, and his burden light. Following in the footsteps of the Good Shepherd, they will entice his sheep by kindness, and will draw them with the bonds of love, and, if necessary, they will not hesitate to lay down their lives for them.

This has nothing to do with making things ‘easy’ for people by playing fast and loose with the truth. It has everything to do with knowing the reality of people’s lives, the reality of their heart and its deep longings, and remembering that ‘love’ and ‘truth’ are inseparable. Nothing is loving that is not true (real). Nothing is true that is not loving, for the ultimate truth, the truth that gives perspective to every truth, is that God is love, and that God always tempers the wind to the shorn lamb, asking only that we take one step of love in the direction pointed out and followed by Jesus.

In their search for meaning, people today are bombarded with untruths in relation to possessions. Of course, like Jesus, we are to confront poverty and the instruments that deprive people of what they need to live a dignified, balanced and truly fulfilling life. But the desperation of today’s world is such that a colossal distortion is in place that keeps telling us to live on the surface of our lives, distracted by possession of or aspirations for unnecessary possessions that fail to satisfy. We MSC have the privilege of being supported by our brothers, such that we are freed to go below the surface. If we are truly loving, without the trappings and clutter of superfluous possessions, we are a powerful counter-witness as to what really matters. Granted the pervasive and intrusive propaganda within which our lives are immersed, we need to be constantly vigilant, lest the hard-working and sometimes desperately poor see us as out-of-touch and privileged bachelors, able to afford personal comforts that are out of their reach. The key here is expressed in No 59: ‘Let all things in the Society be in common’. This provides our main safeguard against

being seduced, and losing one of the most powerful supports of our charism. The Constitutions carry a warning (n. 63):

In the name of Jesus Christ, Who, being rich, became poor for our sakes, let all practise most faithfully this great virtue, and often ponder upon the great benefits it affords, and how severely the Lord will punish those who pull down this bulwark of religious discipline and make a breach through which every abuse and vice can invade the Society.

In their search for meaning, people today are bombarded with untruths in relation to sexual gratification. The adults all know it is a bunch of lies, but the young don't know yet. We MSC know, for we have been educated to see the heart as sacred and sexual union as a sacrament. How people yearn for this. Our willingness to believe it, to attract people to it while daring to live without a sexual partner can, if we are truly loving, be just the kind of shock that people need for them to question the pervasive propaganda. On the condition that we are truly respectful and genuinely loving, our lives can attract others to want to know the source of our love and to discover it where we have found it, in the sacred heart of Jesus. There is nothing preventing us from loving most the person, man or woman, in whose company we find ourselves – loving them, without desire and without seduction, just because of who we see them to be when we penetrate to the heart. This is how Jesus loves, and it is our privilege to be given his heart with which to love, to 'be on earth the heart of God.'

It is worth recording that the following words of Teilhard de Chardin, already quoted, come from an article entitled 'The Evolution of Chastity': 'Some day, after harnessing space, the winds, the tides, and gravitation, we shall harness for God the energies of love. And then, for the second time in the history of the world, we shall have discovered fire.' He wrote that in 1934. It resonates even more powerfully today.

In their search for meaning, people today are bombarded with untruths in relation to independence, freedom to follow their own whims, expecting immediate gratification, disposing of what no longer satisfies, not needing commitment, keeping all options open, changing whenever it seems to their own advantage to do so. This doesn't work. People experience that it doesn't work, but where do they go to discover another way? It is our privilege to invite them to be part of the 'Catholic' dream; to belong in a community and to contribute to the community; to enjoy being in communion with others, sharing with others the meanings and values that they have found real for them, and listening as others share their experiences and discoveries with them. It is our privilege to reveal the freedom that comes with not holding the last say as to where we live or what we do. Our vow of obedience commits us to share what is in our heart, but not to hold the reins in our own hands. We are invited to trust ourselves to a community and to listen to 'every word that comes from the mouth of God', including the words that come from those who have that special grace that comes with organisational authority. If we live this freedom, we find ourselves graced to be instruments of Jesus' love, without the limits that pride or self-doubt can inflict upon us. This, too, is counter-cultural, and liberating for a 'me' generation.

In 1900, Father Jules Chevalier wrote: 'From the heart of Jesus pierced on Calvary, I see a new world coming forth – a great and life-giving world, inspired by love and mercy: a world which the Church must perpetuate on the whole earth.' Is there any less need for this a hundred years on? If we have anything to say to our world it cannot be 'churchy', it cannot be 'denominational' or 'sectarian'. It must be all-embracing; it must be truly 'Catholic'. It has to pick up the clarion call of the Vatican Council:

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men and women of this age, especially those who are in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the grief and the anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed *nothing genuinely human* fails to raise an echo

in their hearts, for theirs is a community composed of men and women. United in Christ, they are led by the Holy Spirit in their journey to the kingdom of their Father, and they have welcomed the news of salvation *which is meant for everyone*' (GS 1).

The Council went on to declare: 'The Church believes she can contribute greatly towards making the family of mankind and its history more human' (GS 40). 'We are witnesses to the birth of a *new humanism*, one in which man and woman are defined first of all by their responsibility toward other people and towards history' (GS 55). Such a mission, especially when it comes from the heart and listens to the heart, is just what the world needs, and people find it very attractive. Do we believe it? Do we live it? Are we as amazed as we should be at the marvels made possible by scientific research? Do we listen as attentively as we should to those who point out the deficiencies, contradictions and hypocrisies that are a scandal to those who look to the Church in the hope of enlightenment? To embrace the world is to walk in Jesus' footsteps. How else can we touch the lives of those who live in it? The injunction to 'shun the world' belongs to a Church and a time that is no longer relevant. I know that it doesn't mean what it seems to mean, but why use words that communicate badly? To 'shun the world' would be to avoid our mission.

We are in the year of Mark. He offers us a number of inspiring insights that could help sustain us to continue our mission is a new world that demands a new evangelizing strategy. His first insight comes very early in the Gospel when Jesus 'called those whom he wanted.' He called them 'to be with him and to be sent out' (Mark 3:14). This picks up the first point made in the previous lecture. Only to the extent that we are 'with him' do we have anything to say when we are engaged in mission.

A second insight takes us to the scene that anchors the section on mission: the scene commonly called 'the multiplication of the loaves'(Mark 6). The apostles have returned from their first mission. Jesus invites them to retire with him. There is a lesson they must learn. The people search them out and, moved with compassion, Jesus spends the day teaching them. The shadows are lengthening. The disciples are concerned that the people are hungry and thirsty. They come to Jesus suggesting that he send them away to get something to eat and drink. This is the opportunity for Jesus to tell them what they most need to learn. To their surprise he says: 'You give them something to eat yourselves.' They are puzzled. He asks them what they have to offer. They search around only to discover that they are ill-equipped to carry out the mission Jesus is giving them. He tells them to organise the people in a manner reminiscent of the Israelites whom God fed with the manna. Then they bring their inadequate gifts to Jesus. He prays to God, takes their bread, breaks it and gives it back to them to distribute. Each time they come back to him he has more to give till everyone in the crowd is satisfied.

We have all that we need to carry out God's will and to be instruments of the love that fills the heart of Jesus, provided we know that it is not we who nourish them, it is Jesus through us. We bring our gifts, without measuring them, to him, place them in his hands and receive them back from him transformed. This happens in the Eucharist, we know. It happens at every moment of our ministry as we offer ourselves to others in love. We are offering Jesus to them. As Paul insists, we all have different gifts, but it is the Spirit that we give each other; we all have different ways of ministering, but it is in response to the grace and the call of Christ; and what we do is as powerful as God for it is God who creates out of nothing through us (1Corinthians 12:4-7). As we minister in his name we are to be filled with quiet confidence, gratitude and wonder. It is not for us to measure the gift. It is for us to give it. God brings the increase in the measure of people's hunger and thirst and readiness. We can encourage this readiness, but no more. Like Jesus and sustained by his Spirit we are to 'do the truth in love' (Ephesians 4:15) whatever the circumstances and whatever the cost. Nothing more and nothing less.

The third scene is the final scene in Jesus' public ministry (Mark 12:41-44). Jesus and his disciples are sitting on the steps leading up to the temple, watching people contribute to the temple treasury. Something happens that became for Peter, and through him for Mark, and through Mark for us all, a symbol of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. A poor widow made what looked like a completely insignificant, even valueless, contribution, but Jesus judged it to be the best contribution of all because she gave all she had without comparing, without false humility. It is not for us to measure, to compare. It is up to us, as missionaries of the heart of Jesus to the post-modern world, to accept Jesus' invitation to draw near to his heart, and then to give ourselves in love, moment by moment, whether we are welcomed or rejected, ever ready to come to him to receive from him his humility, his gentleness, his love, and to let him attract people to his heart through us.

We are not asked to be involved in a maintenance mission, or a restoration one, or a nostalgic one. We are not called to make people happy or unhappy, to make their life easy or difficult, We are called on a mission of love to the real world that we are asked to embrace. The rest is mystery, but a beautiful one and one for which the world hungers.