

#### 4. THE YEAR OF ST JOSEPH OPPORTUNITY FOR LEADERS OF CELLS

##### 1. The crisis of modern leadership

Dear sisters and brothers, I have no problem to confess that I am not an intellectual, I do not pretend to be more than what I am. In fact, I always stand to be corrected and appreciate whenever someone corrects me and illuminates me better.

But I am not interested in doing studies, treatises, or documents. I told you in the first part of this teaching: my call is to be an evangeliser, a Missionary of Mercy and a pastor. My greatest desire is to announce and relay the Good News of Jesus Christ that God is a Father, that He is a Merciful Father who does not wait until the prodigal son comes back but reaches out to him first. I have renounced to be a natural father and to form a natural family, a family built on blood, because I accepted the call from God to share, to participate, in His Fatherhood, that He may form through me a spiritual family, a community, the Church, the Body of Christ.

You cannot imagine how thrilled I was when I got to know the prophecy that Don PiGi received when he met the Parish Cell System of Evangelisation: *“The smallest will grow into a thousand, the weakest one into a mighty nation. When the time is ripe, I, Yahweh, shall quickly bring it about.”* (Is 60,22) Embracing the vision of the Cells of Evangelisation, for me was like attributing that prophecy even to myself. In fact, this was confirmed when Don PiGi expressed to me his desire that I succeed him, and I was expressing my fear to a parish priest, whom God has blessed with hundreds of cells, and gave me this prophecy: *“Ask of me, and I shall give you the nations as your birthright, the whole wide world as your possession.”* (Ps 2,8)

At the beginning of the story of salvation there is a father, there is a Patriarch. We can think of Adam as the father of humanity; but the father of the People of God is Abraham, the father of multitude. Because he was truly tested man of faith, God made him father of a number of children as many as the stars in heaven and the sand by the sea. He had just one son, apart from the other one from his wife's slave. Isaac had two sons. The younger of them, Jacob, had twelve sons. After 400 years in Egypt these counted to six hundred thousand!

At that point a leader was necessary; a leader that was succeeded by a group of judges and then by a monarch. Thus the role and the authority of the “father” was institutionalised, leading to the unfortunate separation or distancing between fatherly figure and the authoritarian one. Therefore, God comes down to remind His People that they had a Father, and He did that through the prophets, like Hosea: *“When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.... it was I who taught E'phraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of compassion, with the bands of love, and I became to them as one who eases the yoke on their jaws, and I bent down to them and fed them.”* (11,1.3-4)

I believe that the crisis of all modern leadership lies here: in the institution. Because of the abuse of authority, which we already referred to, we have an

institutional crisis. Every institution: the institutions of the state, the institution of the Church and even the institution of the family! With regard to the institution of the Church, just to give you an example of what I mean, two years ago Pope Francis called for a Meeting on the Protection of Minors in the Church. During the meeting some victims of sexual abuse by ecclesiastics were invited to share their horrible experience. One of them struck me as he was speaking so hard against those pastors, who were expected to be fathers to him, yet with great respect and love for the Church. Therefore, the problem is not the Church as the Body of Christ, as spiritual communion, but the institution and the people who are leading the institution!

## **2. The need of models, and models of the leader**

Therefore, you see, the word “leader” that we use in the Parish Cell System of Evangelisation is very inappropriate. Can you imagine being part of a group of people where you enjoy spiritual communion amongst yourselves and one of you use the word “leader” with reference to you or to someone else? It will sound odd, wouldn’t it? At least I will feel shy to hear my brother calling me leader! Imagine if you were to hear this word in the family: the wife or the son call the husband or the father leader!

The word “leader” is more appropriate in the context of an institution. Of course, every human group, whatever the depth of spiritual communion has, or eventually develop, an institutional aspect. In fact, we do not speak just of Cells of Evangelisation, but of Parish Cells of Evangelisation. Therefore we cannot forget that our cells form part of an institution. Even more than that, we speak of Parish Cell System of Evangelisation. That means that the cells of evangelisation do not form part of the parish as individual cells, but together they form part of the parish, as a system.

I think that, although our cells are from their very nature very small, built on personal relationships, that we call oikos, and on a personal encounter with Jesus through the renewal of the Holy Spirit, prayer and the Word of God that comes to us through our pastor, and that meet in private homes in all freedom – therefore, without any structure – the tendency to institutionalise the cell and the cell meeting and the role of the leader, will always be there and will always present a temptation and a great challenge for the leaders.

If ever we succumb to such a temptation and challenge, it will be a great pity, not only for the Parish Cell System of Evangelisation, but also for the whole Church, whom God is calling for a pastoral renewal of its structures and of its ministers, bishops and parish priests included. For the last sixty years we have been seeing the Holy Spirit working so hard and so lively to bring the Christian religion and faith as closer together as much as possible, really so as to be again impossible to imagine having active members of the Church who do not believe and are everything except missionary-disciples or having sincere “sinners” who love Jesus but find themselves judged and unwelcome in the Church.

If we, as leaders, division leaders, area leaders etc, want to overcome this temptation, we either need to find another name for “leader” – which is not the most

important thing – or else to keep reminding ourselves what we, as disciples of Jesus Christ, intend by the word “leader”, which might not correspond to what the world understands by it.

The first definition, icon or model, that Jesus Himself gave us of the word “leader” is the one we find in John 13 when, after washing their feet, He said to His disciples: *“You call me Master and Lord, and rightly; so I am. If I, then, the Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you must wash each other's feet. I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done to you. In all truth I tell you, no servant is greater than his master; no messenger is greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know this, blessed are you if you behave accordingly.”* (13-17)

Another definition, icon or model, that Jesus gave us of the word “leader” is the one we find in John 10, when He declared Himself as the Good Shepherd, or really the Beautiful Shepherd. Remember that the word “pastor” and its derivatives come from the Latin translation of the word shepherd. Every leader in the Church, including the leader of the cell, is a participation in the pastoral mission of Jesus. *“I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for my sheep.”* (14-15)

It is interesting how, when Jesus speaks about Himself being the Good Shepherd, He thinks of His Father. This is surely another icon and model for the Christian leader and the leader of the cell. However, our Protestant brethren are very sensitive in not using this term of “father”. The reason is that even Jesus seems to have prohibited the use of the word “father” when applied to us. *“You, however, must not allow yourselves to be called Rabbi, since you have only one Master, and you are all brothers. You must call no one on earth your father, since you have only one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor must you allow yourselves to be called teachers, for you have only one Teacher, the Christ. The greatest among you must be your servant.”* (Mt 23,8-11)

The way I see it is that Jesus wants to eliminate the gap as much as possible between the one who leads and those who follow. This might be very hard for us to understand, because the world teaches us something quite different, not only, it teaches us exactly the contrary and this is what it shows us continuously. That is why the Good News is scandalous for the man of today, and even for us. This explains why we mitigate the Good News so much in its proclamation and the way we live it and why it has little impact on the lives of those who hear us or observe us. By prohibiting us to call anyone of our brethren “father”, by calling us to participate in His pastoral mission of giving our lives to the sheep entrusted to us in our sheepfold no matter how small it might be, and to order us to lower ourselves down to the status of a servant that washes the feet of others, Jesus was revealing to us a new way of being leader, a new way of leading others, really God’s way!

When we have chosen to go astray, to go our way; when we have decided to harden our heart and become disobedient; when we have taken a position of separation from God, He did not choose to affirm Himself, He did not assert His authority, He did not distance from our sinfulness. On the contrary, He sent His Only Son, *“Who, being in the form of God, did not count equality with God something to be grasped. But he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,*

*becoming as human beings are; and being in every way like a human being, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross.*" (Fil 2,6-8) The Mystery of the Incarnation reveals the method of God's leadership: to lead by example.

My father was a soldier, but at home I have never saw him with the uniform! I know him only as my father. But what is the uniform of a father? I do not know; and he did not need to wear a uniform for us to recognise him as our father. In fact, he never felt the need to tell us: "*I am your father!*" As a soldier he was very strict and disciplined, even with us, he never felt the need to affirm or assert himself as our father. Those who feel the need of some sort of uniform or title, some external sign to prove that they are leaders, pastors or fathers, the probability is that they are insecure of their call and mission. My father was a great companion, he accompanied us as we grew. He knew how to become a little child when we were little children. We had great respect and fear of him, but we knew he loved us so much, we knew he was giving all his life for us. You know what? When we remember him or mention him with my brothers and sister, we rarely quote anything he used to say, but mostly what he used to do and how he used to do it: especially, his passion for life and his joy in living it!

### **3. A year of contemplation of St Joseph as model of the leader**

Dear sisters and brothers, what a blessed year we are offered by God the Father through Pope Francis! The Year of St Joseph is a great opportunity for us to renew our leadership that we may see all our cells be revitalised and growing and multiplying. Some of our Promoters and Referents are already very excited because they are already seeing signs of an explosion of cells of evangelisation when the crisis of the pandemic has passed.

Let us altogether spend a year of contemplation of this unique model that is St Joseph. He impresses us by his being hidden and always in the shadow, by his silence. As Jesus said, he never referred to himself as father, yet this is the way Mary, His special Wife and Mother of Jesus referred to him: "*See how worried your father and I have been, looking for you.*" (Lk 2,48) We know nothing about him, but we know that he accompanied Jesus from birth to maturity so as to be the servant of all and the Good Shepherd that gives His life for His sheep.

I wish to praise God for the members of the Commission of Promoters of the International Organism at the Service of the Parish Cells of Evangelisation, that as a team has welcomed the idea of putting on this School of St Joseph for Leaders, Co-Leaders and potential leaders of cells of evangelisation and are giving their contribution with great enthusiasm. I wish to praise God also for the Referents of different countries, some of which were asked to contribute for this School. I am so sorry that we could not involve all of them, but I am sure they will have other opportunities in the future.

In our contemplation we are taking the inspiration from what Pope Francis wrote in the Apostolic Letter *Patris Corde*. Although St Joseph is such a hidden and silent father, Pope Francis managed to bring out so many beautiful aspects of his

fatherhood: beloved, tender and loving, obedient, accepting and welcoming, creatively courageous, labouring, and discerning in the shadow.

One last thing before I conclude this introduction. I know that many leaders of cells are women. Proposing St Joseph as a model of fatherhood for them might sound and look strange. Maybe they prefer to take Mary and her maternity as their model. Of course, we need also Mary in the Church, because the Church is a mother, and the cell exists to give new life and bear new children. However, let me share with you a beautiful experience I heard recently which made me realise how relevant the contemplation of St Joseph and his example of fatherhood is even for female leaders.

Some weeks ago, I was attending a meeting of the French speaking group of Promoters and Referents. At one point, Abbé Francois Dedieu, the Referent for France, shared what his female co-ordinator, Béatrice Vachon, told him. She told him: *“My mission is to be like St Joseph, working in the shadow, taking care of every leader and member of our cells.”* To which he answered jokingly: *“If you are like St Joseph, then I am like Mary!”* And she answered: *“Yes! You are like Mary, because the Holy Spirit has inspired you to introduce the Parish Cell System of Evangelisation in our parish! I am like St Joseph, called to protect, take care and accompany each cell, every cell leader, and everyone of the cell members!”*

You see! There is no problem of gender with God. May all of us, male or female, called to lead others, called to lead a cell in your parish, in the Church, see your call and mission receive new spirit, new enthusiasm and new energy from the fatherhood of St Joseph! I offer my daily Mass for each one of you. God bless you and St Joseph intercede for you together with Mary Our Mother.