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THE WORD AS LIBERATING POWER
***The Word of God, Ferment of Liberation for the Mission
of Consecrated Life***

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Introduction: the “Poem of the Four Nights”

The Union of Superiors General asked me to offer some examples from the experience of my religious family in the hope of illustrating the theme: *the Word of God: ferment of liberation for the mission of Consecrated Life*. To introduce this reflection, I would like to borrow a literary form from Judaism at the time of Jesus Christ, the «targum». As you know, the targums are interpretive Aramaic translations of the Bible for use in synagogue liturgies. The targum that interests me is the Aramaic translation and commentary on Exodus 12,42, famously called the “Poem of the Four Nights.” Exodus 12,42 reads:

This was a night of vigil for the LORD, as he led them out of the land of Egypt; so on this same night all the Israelites must keep a vigil for the LORD throughout their generations (Ex 12,42)

The night of the Passover remembers and re-presents the Exodus, the central religious experience for the Jewish people. For its part, the targum on Exodus 12,42 provides a surprisingly profuse answer to the question posed on Pesach by the youngest son of the family – “why is this night different from every other night” – by linking three other nights with the Passover and the Exodus story. The first and second nights have already happened: the night when YHWH delivered creation from chaos and when Isaac was delivered from the knife of Abraham. The third night is the Exodus itself. The fourth night is still to come and will mark the appearance of the messiah and the restoration of Israel. Creation, the deliverance of Isaac and the coming of the messiah are all set in relation to the rescue, the liberation, the redemption of Israel. By the time of Jesus, these other “nights” had become part of the annual liturgical celebration of the delivery from Egypt in the Passover meal.

What I hope to do in this reflection is to offer a sort of “targum” on John 10,10 – “I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly” – sharing with you three “days” from the experience of the Redemptorists, my religious family. These “days” happen in different countries: Indonesia, Northern Ireland and Byelorussia, but I intend to read these experiences in the light of the liberating power of the Word of God, a power that is manifest most completely in the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ. As consecrated people, we must be humble and courageous servants of this Word, which brings about plentiful redemption, that is, a liberation which affects the entire person, bringing to perfection and transforming all human values, so as to unite all things in Christ (cf. Eph 1,10; I Cor 3,23) and leading to their completion in a new earth and a new heaven (Rev 21,1).

Sumba: liberation from spirits (Col 2, 9-10)

The first “day” takes place on Sumba, one of the poorest islands in eastern Indonesia. Its population of 350,000 is scattered across craggy mountains and grassy plains. There are a few large towns, where the people come to buy and sell, but most live in the countryside in small enclaves called *kampongs*, a collection of open-sided bamboo huts, each housing a family and whatever livestock they possess. The people wrench a meagre existence from the grudging soil; rice and corn are subject to the whims of wind and a merciless sun. Malnutrition is widespread and infant mortality is amongst the highest in the world.

Redemptorists from Germany came to Sumba in the 1950’s, accepting a mission that already had been abandoned by two other religious orders. At the beginning, the confreres from the Rhineland were almost

completely cut off from the world beyond – no phones, no flights – the only fragile link provided by an inter-island freighter that appeared on the horizon every six weeks or so.

The people of Sumba live in a world of spirits called *merapu*, the souls of the ancestors. These *merapu* were created in heaven by the Supreme Being, a creator that cannot be seen or named, but is known as Great Mother or Great Father. The Creator gave *merapu* the right to govern the Sumbanese and thus the *merapu* provide the link with the Creator. Sometimes benevolent, often malicious, the *merapu* are to be feared and revered. Every *kampung* has one or two massive tombs that house the remains of the more prominent forebears, while the peculiarly peaked roofs of the bamboo huts are designed to welcome wandering spirits. Elaborate rituals accompany a death in order to help the family accompany their relative's passage to the world of the *merapu*. In fact, the *merapu* exert a direct, daily influence on the life of the Sumbanese. Rituals must be performed and taboos strictly observed to avoid disastrous consequences for the individual and the clan.

For the Christians of Sumba, the Word of God brings about liberation from a milieu of fear and menace. Their intercessor in life and death is no longer found among the demanding ancestral spirits but rather Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The freedom of these Christians, however, is neither instantaneous nor complete. The process of evangelization demands a patient and progressive penetration of the culture by the Word. After people accept the Gospel and ask for baptism, they remain in families where other members still practice the traditional rituals. Given the importance of the clan, the Christians have had to work out a sort of spiritual symbiosis, which allows them live peacefully their new life without a total rupture with the clan. Confreres who come from such families tell me that there is an acceptable compromise on the occasion of the great feasts: the Christian members bring their gifts of food but avoid a sort of *communicatio in sacris* by not participating in the traditional rituals that precede the meal.

It is impressive to see how the Catholic Christians of Sumba appear to preserve more elements of the traditional culture than do Christians of other Churches. My Indonesian confreres explain that the Catholic liturgy lends itself to a level of inculturation that uses words, music and symbols already familiar to the Sumbanese. However, I have been struck by the little evidence of the cult of the saints: it may be that the *merapu* are not easily "baptized" and inserted into the communion of the saints.

The Word of God liberates Sumbanese from bondage to a world of spirits without severing the bounds of family and culture, which continue to sustain the believers.

Belfast: common ground for peace (Eph 2,14-15)

The second "day" of this Targum on John 10,10 takes place in Belfast, Northern Ireland. For the last three decades of the twentieth century, Belfast and the surround six counties of the province of Ulster became for the world a sort of Christian *jihad*, where unspeakable atrocities were purported to have been carried out in the name of God. The so-called "Troubles" consisted of about thirty years of recurring acts of intense brutality between elements of Northern Ireland's nationalist community (principally Roman Catholic) and unionist community (principally Protestant). The conflict was caused by nationalist opposition to Northern Ireland's status within the United Kingdom as well as the domination of the minority nationalist community and discrimination against them by the unionist majority.

Between 1969 and 2001, 3,523 people were killed as a result of the Troubles; another 40,000 people were wounded. Beyond those statistics, the Troubles' impact on the ordinary people of Northern Ireland produced such psychological trauma that the city of Belfast had been compared to London during the Blitz. The stress resulting from bomb attacks, street disturbances, security checkpoints, and the constant military presence had the strongest effect on children and young adults. Illegitimate births and alcoholism increased for women and the divorce rate rose. It has been demonstrated that a legacy of the Troubles has played a substantial role in the current high rate of suicide in Northern Ireland.

Many people today have had their political, social, and communal attitudes and perspectives shaped by the Troubles. The resulting "balkanization" of Ulster along confessional lines has made normal interaction and friendship with people from the opposite side of the religious/political divide nearly impossible in the atmosphere of fear and distrust that the Troubles generated.

In this atmosphere of anomie, community fragmentation and disintegration and a culture of suspicion and segregation, the Word of God is creating a space where Christians of different confessions can meet in

safety and work for peace. This space was born through the friendship of two churches on either side of so-called "Peace Line", the barrier which divides Catholic and Protestant enclaves in Belfast. In the early 1980's Fitzroy Presbyterian Church and Clonard Catholic Church, which is served by my confreres, began an unprecedented dialogue of faith and life. Please do not underestimate the astounding nature of this exchange, which brought together people who otherwise would have had absolutely nothing to do with each other. The growing familiarity of the two congregations by viewed with great scepticism by both sides in the conflict. In fact, Reverend Ken Newell, the courageous pastor of Fitzroy Presbyterian, was nearly excommunicated by his denomination for daring to speak and pray with Catholics.

The initiative of Fitzroy Presbyterian and Clonard Church has given birth to other hope-filled projects. One is the Cornerstone Community, a small group of Protestant and Catholic Christians, some of whom live in the Community House on the "Peace Line". Another effort is called the "unity pilgrims", a movement that is playing a crucial role in the ministry of reconciliation of Catholics and local congregations of the Protestant Churches of Northern Ireland.

After the 1994 ceasefires, the "unity pilgrims", all of whom are associated with Clonard Catholic Church, began visits to Churches in the Protestant district of Shankill: four Presbyterian, three Church of Ireland and three Methodist. By previous arrangement with the ministers of the Protestant congregations, the pilgrims go from Clonard Church to share in their Sunday morning worship. Over the years these visits, which occur a several times annually, have transformed the relationship among the congregations. Old fears and prejudices melt away, to be replaced by a sense of communion, described by one participant as a sense of being "at home" with one another. Unity pilgrims believe that all the disciples of Jesus need to meet in him and to meet him in one another. They need to share their gifts "so that the world may believe" that Jesus was sent by the Father as the Saviour of the whole world (cf. Jn 17,21).

Sharing the Word of God has encouraged congregations of Christians to reach across the barriers of prejudice and fear in order to establish new bonds of friendship in the common pursuit of peace. These projects put the work of ecumenism into the hands of the people. The liberating Word of God leads them to worship with other congregations, thus helping to end an alienation from one another on the Lord's Day, which has persisted in Northern Ireland for hundreds of years.

Byelorussia: liberation from addiction (Lk 13,15-17)

The third "day" of this targum occurs in Byelorussia, where Redemptorists serve the People of God in a large urban parish in Grodno as well as in small towns and villages. It was precisely in these small towns that a new "day" of liberation dawned.

Like its neighbours in Eastern Europe, Byelorussia is plagued by the widespread abuse of alcohol. Among the countries of the former Soviet Union, people living in Russia, Ukraine, and Byelorussia are the heaviest drinkers, primarily consuming vodka and *samogon*, a homemade liquor. Twenty years ago several studies demonstrated that these countries were facing an alcohol problem of truly crisis proportions. *The Economist* (1989) reported that a decrease in life expectancy for males, from 66 years in 1965 to 62 years in 1984, was largely attributed to heavy alcohol consumption, and that studies from the West suggested that alcoholism was the third leading cause of death in the Soviet Union, after heart disease and cancer. In addition to the high death rate among alcoholics, two-thirds of murders and violent crimes were committed by intoxicated persons; and traffic accidents caused by drunk drivers are responsible for thousands of deaths and serious injuries.

During a visit to Byelorussia, I heard my confreres describe the ravages brought about by alcohol abuse. For me, it was particularly disturbing to hear how workers on large collective farms were sometimes paid in alcohol, not currency. As a result, it was not unusual for workers to return home at the end of the week and drink themselves to death. When I asked the communities what sort of response was given to this desperate situation, I was appalled by the answer: Christian burial was denied to anyone who died from the abuse of alcohol.

I pointed out to my brothers that such an exemplary solution did nothing except humiliate the surviving relatives for the perceived wickedness of the dead. If we could not be more compassionate and creative, we would certainly share the condemnation reserved for the doctors of the law, whom Jesus denounced for imposing on people burdens hard to carry, without lifting a finger to help them (cf. Lk 11,46). I asked these missionaries whether they had ever heard of the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). Some were familiar

with members of the fellowship in Poland. I suggested strongly that these recovering alcoholics be invited to carry the message of freedom and healing that they had found through AA.

There was some reluctance to accept my suggestion, since AA clearly was not a “Catholic” society. I agreed that the fellowship was not associated with any denomination but, in fact, it had helped many Catholics to escape from the insanity of active alcoholism and restored them to their families, friends and Church. After the visit, the confreres invited some members of AA from Poland and the first groups were established in this region of Byelorussia. Although I cannot offer a statistics, I am sure that many sick and suffering alcoholics have found new freedom and happiness as they came to realize that God was doing for them what they could not do for themselves.

Conclusion

Jesus, the Word made flesh, “revealed that God was with us, to deliver us from the darkness of sin and death, and to raise us up to eternal life” (*Dei Verbum*, 4). The “abundant life” that Jesus brings (Jn 10,10) must include liberation from all that would enslave men and women, beginning with sin (Rm 6,17; Jn 1,17) but including all conditions that would disfigure the dignity that belongs to the daughters and sons of God. In this reflection, I have tried to demonstrate how the Word worked through consecrated persons in order to free men and women from bondage to spirits, violence and fear, and the soul-crushing disease of alcoholism. I offer three additional thoughts for consecrated persons who intend to carry liberating power of the Word of God:

1. As witnesses of the Good News of the grace of God (cf Acts 20:24) we proclaim before everything else the very high destiny of the individual and of the whole human race. We strive to encounter the Lord where He is already present and at work in his own mysterious way. The story from Indonesia invites us to search for the seeds of the Gospel rather than impose, even unconsciously, religious or cultural colonialism
2. In a world of violence, resentment and fear, the Word provides common ground for peacemaking and rebukes any chauvinism that would keep people apart. The story from Belfast reminds us of the happy words of Isaiah: “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings glad tidings, Announcing peace, bearing good news, announcing salvation, and saying to Zion, ‘Your God is King!’” (Is, 52,7).
3. Just as Jesus met lepers and demoniacs in the full horror of their alienation, the Word continues to meet people on the margin of Church and society. Liberation from disease and the end of alienation are sometimes portrayed in the Gospel as the preparation for discipleship: Jesus first heals the person and then invites him to follow him and to witness to God’s providence.

The story from Belorussia suggests that liberation may not always come in familiar formulas. In the face of any sort of oppression, our discernment should recall the conversation between John and Jesus, when John said... “Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name and we tried to prevent him because he does not follow in our company.” Jesus said to him, “Do not prevent him, for whoever is not against you is for you” (Lk 9,49-50).

At the heart of the consecrated life is the petition: “Your Kingdom come!” Pope John Paul II in the apostolic exhortation, *Vita Consecrata*, reminds us that this expectation is anything but passive: “although directed towards the future Kingdom, it expresses itself in work and mission, that the Kingdom may become present here and now through the spirit of the Beatitudes, a spirit capable of giving rise in human society to effective aspirations for justice, peace, solidarity and forgiveness. This is clearly shown by the history of the consecrated life, which has always borne abundant fruit even for this world” (n. 27).