

Effata- Open yourself

At the beginning of the General Chapter, which took place in Chang Mai in June 2023, the General Superior, Fr. Gustavo Agin, presented a survey of the present state of the Congregation and the future prospects. Among other things, he wrote: *“I propose to you to start from a gesture of faith found in the Gospel of Mark: the people who lead the deaf-mute of the Gospel represent those who lead, today in Betharram, to encounter Jesus. Jesus-Christ does not want to see us deaf, dumb, prostrated or disheartened! He neither wants to see us static, disillusioned or isolated. Himself takes us apart and cures us of everything which weighed on us, isolated us, depressed us. (...) Then Jesus looking at the sky, sighed and said: Effata! Open yourself!”*

Let us take some time to let us enlighten by the example of Jesus, to read over our experiences of living besides the disabled, to pray with biblical texts, to sound ourselves on our way to be heedful, open Religious.

Lectio divina on Mark 7:31-37.

Jesus leaves Tyr, goes through Sidon, walks towards the sea of Galilee (today Tiberiade) **in the territory of the Decapole**, where the ten towns were enjoying some administrative and commercial autonomy. These towns were pro-imperial, characterized by a mainly pagan culture and population, and thanks to the constant traffic of caravans going from Damas to Alexandria in Egypt or from the East to the port of Tyr, the inhabitants of the Decapole were *open to novelty and not closed on themselves*. The scribes, the levites and the doctors of the Law were avoiding them for religious reasons. For Jesus it is not a problem : his mission is *to meet the people*, to let himself be approached and to get in touch with the sinners, the prostitutes, the lepers, all those who are suffering from any disease. The salute comes from God, not from the obsessional observance of the Law. The Kingdom of God is near, still better, it is among us.

“Some people brought him”. The verb has no precise subject, and those people have no face. Some people who care about this unhappy man, *take care of him*, and are inhabited by some hope. They are open to novelty

because they have already heard about Jesus. A feeling of trust in this master who spoke and acted with authority was born in them. Healing starts when someone settles himself to the very human *art of accompanying*.

“A deaf-mute”. Bearing an invalidating handicap, he is a man enclosed in himself, unable to communicate with his family, his relations, his neighbours, unable to express a wish to be cured or even to shout: “Lord, have pity on me!”. He could neither hear nor speak. He was *a man prisoner of silence, a life without words or music*. He was not a pariah excluded from society, since, on the contrary, he is welcomed in a circle of friends who take care of him.

“Jesus led him apart”, far from the crowd: you and me, alone. Now, you only counts: *nothing is more important than you*. I imagine them gazing into each other’s eyes. Jesus takes his face in his hands. He puts his fingers in the deaf’s ears, and with his saliva, he touches the mute’s tongue. A stroke! No words, only the tender gestures.

Imposition of the hands, fingers in the ears, saliva on the tongue. The imposition of the hands is a gesture which communicates God’s salutary energies. It is a gesture of benediction, (Genesis 48,14-17;49,26 ; Mc 6,5) of consecration (Nom 8,10), of transmission of the spirit of wisdom (Dt 34,9), of separation of the sacrificed victim from the rest (Ex 29,10. 15.19), of approval of the verdict condemning someone to death (Lv 24,14 ; Dn 13,34). Jesus, with his saliva, touches the mute’s tongue as to tell him: “I give you something of myself with the breath and the speech, symbols of life”. *Physical contact was not distasteful for Jesus*, on the contrary. Bodies become a holy place of encounter with the Lord, a laboratory of the Kingdom. Salvation is not unconnected with the bodies, it passes through them, which are not the path towards evil but “divine shortcuts” (J.P.Sonnet).

“Looking at the sky, he sighed”. A sigh is neither a cry expressing power, nor a sob, but the breath of hope, calm and humble, *the captive’s moan* (Ps. 102,21). Jesus is also captive, with this man.

“Effata”-open yourself. In Aramean, in the “maternal dialect”, as Pope Francis would say, Effata, open yourself *as you open a door to your host, a window to the sun, the arms for love*. Open yourself to others and to God, even with your wounds, through which life goes out and life comes in. Here is expressed the capacity of solidarity of Jesus, who suffers with the other one, with the suffering, becomes empathic with the sick man and invokes liberation for him. All this is accompanied by a word Jesus says with strength: “*Effata*, open yourself !” It is much more than an order to the ears and tongue, as it appeals to the whole person.

“His ears opened, his tongue was loosened, and he was speaking correctly”. First, the ears. The first service we do to God and man is always to listen. If you don’t know how to listen, you loose speech, you become dumb or you speak without touching anybody’s heart. The deaf-mute must learn how to listen to be able to articulate the perceived sounds correctly. Only then he can speak correctly.

An experience of life.

In Bethlehem, not far from our house, you can visit the *Pontifical Institute Paul VI, Ephphata*. During his pilgrimage in the Holy Land in January 4th to 6th 1964, Paul VI, struck by the number of deaf-mutes wandering about the streets, decided to open a specialized institute to guarantee the dignity of handicapped persons and make them able to build their own lives.

The Sisters of Saint Dorothea, experts in this matter, accepted the proposal to create an Institute for deaf-mutes. The followed method consists in teaching, as early as the nursery school, how to read on the lips and listen to sounds thanks to specialized instruments, and not by interpreting signs. Why ? The deaf-mute must be able to look at the person in the face and not follow the movements of his hands. In the family or in society, everyone can communicate with a deaf-dumb child or friend by articulating the words well, as no one knows the grammar of the gestures. Succeeding to pronounce a word is a victory for the child and a source of joy for the parents when they feel called for the first time, “*baba, mama, shukran*” (daddy, mummy, thank you »).

The Betharramites have been the Chaplains of the house for a long time. Personally, I was in charge of the catechesis of Christian deaf-mute children, preparing them for their first communion. It was not easy to speak to them in a simple way : we understood each other by our eyes, and by watching the motions of my lips they succeeded in understanding the meaning of the words.

Invited to a feast for the end of the year, I have seen, to my great surprise, the children – christian and moslem together- dancing while respecting perfectly the rhythm of the music, which many did not hear, while others only perceived sounds. I applauded not only these children, but also the novices of 2008-2009, priests today (Fr. Jean-Paul kissi scj and Fr. Vincent Worou scj) who had prepared the feast with much patience and love.

Love and patience make miracles. The Sisters’ and teachers’ patience and love have given much fruit : some boys succeeded in entering the university, some girls have found a job as secretaries in local firms, others have a manual job which allowed them to found a family and build a future.

Biblical references for praying.

In the Bible, the words ear-ears and tongue are often present in the Pentateuch, as in the books of Wisdom, the Prophets and the New Testament. The Biblical concordance quotes 50 times the word “ear, ears” and 82 mentions of “tongue, languages”. This does show that the organs of hearing and speech are fundamental to communicate, pray, announce help and comfort. The oriental wisdom is a humanism which, in Israël, progressively acquires a religious value: God’s Wisdom shows itself always, everywhere, and whatever happens. What is important is to know how to seize it.

The texts proposed underneath can be used for meditating. You can find others.

Is 35,4-6 is an invitation to joy addressed to those redeemed from oppression: “Be strong! Do not be afraid. Here is your God, vengeance is coming, divine retribution; he is coming to save you.” *Then the eyes of the blind will be opened, the ears of the deaf unsealed, then the lame will leap like a deer and the tongue*

of the dumb sing for joy.”

Is 50,4-5 invites us to commit ourselves in favour of those who feel abandoned and forgotten by the Lord. *“Lord Yahweh has given me a disciple’s tongue, for me to know how to give a word of comfort to the weary. Morning by morning he makes my ear alert to listen like a disciple. Lord Yahweh has opened my ear and I have not resisted, I have not turned away.”*

For the personal or communitary reflection.

The aphesis of the Church perhaps depends today on the fact that we do not know how to listen, neither to God nor to Man. An eloquent detail : only the one who knows how to listen knows how to speak. It is a gift we must ask tirelessly, for the deaf-mute who is in ourselves: Lord, give us a listening heart (cf ; 1 R 3,9). Then shall be born thoughts and words with a heavenly taste.

1. To learn the art of accompaniment. Our whole person must be engaged in meeting and caring about the other one : thoughts and feelings are not enough, words are not enough, even if they are the most appropriate and holy. Do I give myself willingly to animation and spiritual accompaniment, as well as to the ministry of the sacrament of reconciliation ? (R.of L.124) How do I prepare myself ?
2. A man prisoner of silence, a life without words and without music. A disabled person in his faculty of communication cannot speak clearly, neither listen, which condemns him to a painful isolation. Are we able to listen to those who suffer and engage ourselves for the integral promotion of the human person (R.of L.125) ? How can I show my presence near those who are alone ?
3. Nothing is more important than you. To be open to the other person, to the others, to God, is not an evident operation : we must learn how to do it, we must train ourselves, and it is only in this way that we get over human therapeutic ways, which are always also ways of spiritual salvation. Our community life is it true? Is it a testimony? Why do I feel more in communion with those who live elsewhere than with those who share my roof? (R.of L.101,102).
4. To open oneself as we open a door to the guest, a window to the sun, our arms for love. Indeed, we should accomplish the diacona of the Logos, of the Word, which means not only to announce it, but awaken it, arouse it in those who are prevented. Why, in our churches, don’t we call to speak those who do not speak easily ? Why should not we allow allow them to speak inn an authentic way ? Why don’t we have the patience to listen to those who speak uneasily ? Why aren’t our churches a place of “logotherapy”, so necessary in our assemblies, often dumb ? Why don’t we help, as far as curing them, those who stammer in faith and chistian life? (R.of L.117,121,126,128-129).

“Open yourself !” is an invitation we ought to hear as a word of the Lord addressed here and now to each of us. At the same time, it is an invitation that we can and must address ourselves to the others, so that communication may bloom ; from communication to sharing ; from sharing to community ; from community to communion. These are the most urgent ecclesial itineraries !



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