

Two communities: Philippi and Betharram

The origin of a charism is always the experience of the Spirit lived by a person elected by God to realize His work in the Church. The person is a concrete person, a son (or a daughter) of his time, integrated in his middle of life, able to seize the real needs of his contemporaries. Such were the founders of ecclesial communities, the initiators of spiritual movements, the founders of orders and institutes of consecrated life. This is how our Betharramite pioneers behaved, conscious of their natural predispositions, coming from a particular social and cultural environment, and aware of the values already lived in it.

Paul of Tarsis, open to the Spirit's action, a charismatic man, was able to understand this Philippian world with its natural values and predispositions which contributed to and made easier the creation of the first Christian community in the West. His captivity did not diminish his fervour of an apostle of Jesus Christ. Before coming back to the model to imitate, he reminds the Philippian community of the indispensable characteristics to penetrate ever more into the mystery of Christ, humble and obedient. *“By Saint Michael Garicoïts, the Holy Spirit has raised up in the Church a religious institute the vocation of which is to reproduce and manifest the impulse of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the incarnate Word, saying to his Father: ‘Ecce venio’, and committing himself to all His wills for the redemption of men”* (R. of L. 2). Saint Michael had not started from nothing. He had foreseen, among his first collaborators in the Betharramite seminary and companions in the mission, some natural predispositions, hidden desires, waking dreams. All desired to recenter their sacerdotal lives on Christ and to imitate some outstanding aspects: humility, poverty, obedience.

I – Characteristics of a charismatic community.

Paul describes the fundamental characteristics of life in a community.

1) The four “if”.

“Therefore **if** there is any consolation in Christ, **if** any comfort of love, **if** any fellowship of the Spirit, **if** any affection and mercy”. (Ph.2,1)

Grammatically, “if” is a conjunction expressing doubt, or opinions or desires. Paul has no doubt about the Philippians’ faith, but he encourages them to discover the predispositions and values they already have, and which are indispensable to choose Jesus as a model of life: such is his great desire. From Timothy’s testimony, the Apostle is conscious that the Philippians, though they are a young community, are called to abandon, personally and collectively, the ancient man’s values, to be clothed by those of the new man born from water and the Spirit. Each one can take his part, if he wants it, in the building of the community.

2) The community’s face.

Paul desires and always dreams of an authentic community life, and wishes its members to be joyful. He prompts the Philippians to examine themselves about four aspects, the sign of their well-being together.

a) Comfort in Christ. The Apostle’s announcement has contributed to improve the psychological and spiritual situation of the believers in Christ. To be in Christ means not to be alone any longer. In fact, “to comfort” precisely means “not to be alone”. Comfort offers the reason to hope in a different future, and to trust the person who proposes a different path. The community gets stronger when all its members succeed in overcoming the solitude caused by reciprocal division, by accusing one another, by the idea that the other one is a hell. The community builds itself when I succeed in conceiving that the other one is “a comfort” for me, he prevents me from feeling lonely. Man is made for relation; if he is alone, he dies. The brother, though he is different from me, is with me; his difference is an offered richness. So the first meaning of the community is this: not to be alone anymore. Why ? Because we are in Christ. *“For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ (...) And this consolation is effective for enduring the same sufferings which we also suffer”.* (2 Cor. 1, 5-6)

b) Comfort, a fruit of charity. The word “comfort” means being near someone, and so giving him courage. If we are near one another and if we encourage one another, the other one gives me the strength to walk together for better for worse. It is to know how to love one another concretely and not only with words .

c) Communion of the Spirit. As believers, we live from the unique life which is the life of Christ to imitate, of the loving and compationate Father, of the Spirit spread on every one of us. Jesus says: *“As the Father loved me, so I have loved you”*. He does not say: “So I loved the Father” but *“so I have loved you”*. (Jn. 15,9) It is a life of communion uniting the brother to the brother.

d) Feelings of love and compassion. Conscious not to be alone anymore, we find the courage to love and the comfort of being loved, the result being that a climate of affection and compassion is felt in the community. It is a reciprocal feeling which consoles, comforts and unites one to the other, accepting one another gratuitously such as we are. *“Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interest of others”.* (Ph. 2, 3-4)

When someone seeks only what is due to him, he cuts himself from his brother and both end by quarrelling about what should be the common interest. The true glory, the full and entire glory, is not that of the one who seeks his own interest, but that of Christ who gets

rid of himself until the end.

Such is the face of the community Paul dreams of seeing more and more resplendent among the Philippians.

3) A source of life for the community.

As for the Philippians, it is not because they are good – they were good already – that they succeed in living this comfort, this communion, this affection, this compassion, but now that they live in Christ, they must be better.

If I really live in Christ, not only the other one, though he is of Israëlite or pagan origin, is a brother for me and not an enemy from whom I should defend myself; he is my strength and gives me courage.

If they really have the same Holy Spirit in common, their relationship is no longer competition, envy, jealousy, dispute, but a relationship of compassion, tenderness, love, acceptance, typically maternal and unconditional.

If they are really conscious to have received the gift of baptism, they are able to let themselves inspired by it, to honour it by a life beyond reproach.

Paul reminds them of this life principle, he rejoices and thanks the Lord for it. Not only this: he comforts “all the saints in Christ who are in Philippi”. (Ph. 1,1), reinforces them, stimulates them to live in such a way, fighting against the risks and dangers, insisting on the positive side: to live such a gift individually and collectively.

It is a moral imperative! Either spiritual life grows, or it diminishes. Paul’s joy is to see the community growing. The other’s good does not worry him. He is already living all these feelings for the community and says: make my joy grow, for my joy is to see you growing in faith and love.

II – The beautiful adventure of two communities.

Adventure is risky but attractive and full of charm for the unknown or unexpected aspects. Paul knew neither Cappadocia nor the town of Philippi. However, he throws himself in this adventure with enthusiasm.

Fr. Michael Garicoïts succeeded in interesting some priests in the good which might be made by a community united in the Heart of Jesus. Caught by the idea to go where the others did not want to go, he threw himself into the adventure of founding a society of priests “*faithful to their motto, without delay, without reserve, without coming back, not stopping back in front of any sacrifice*”. (DS § 164)

Paul’s and Fr. Garicoïts adventures are different since they do not belong to the same time, but they aim at something similar.

1) France, like Cappadocia.

Wealth and profit made from the poorest and foreign workers, authoritarianism of the ruling class, superiority complex and magnificence of the governors, defence of the accumulated or inherited civil and economical privileges: all this had provoked a general dissatisfaction. The most cunning had benefitted of the occasion to conciliate the authorities, being traitors, in passing, to their conscience. In spite of the social situation, Paul had spotted in the Philippians germs of kindness, beauty, honesty and other authentic values.

The French Revolution, with its principles of liberty, equality, fraternity, had a strong, vast, deep impact on those who were the victims of exploitation, social inequalities and severe economical crisis, and on those who had to bear the arbitrary absolute monarch. The people had to get used to reason alone, and to use this to decide a way of acting and what to believe. These factors, added to others, started an unprecedented popular revolt, the division between the clergy faithful to the regime and faithful to the Pope, an endemic religious ignorance. In spite of this situation, there were also germs of goodness in France: faithfulness and honesty were sought values, the theological virtues were lived and fought for. Prophetic voices were never missing. Concerning Betharram, let us think of the example of the Garicoïts, Anghelu, Etchecopar families and of so many saints of that period.

2) Michael Garicoïts like Paul of Tarsis.

Paul writes to his beloved community of Philippi: *"I am here for the defence of the Gospel"* (Ph 1,16)... *"with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death"* (Ph 1,20). In Philippi, a young slave girl was possessed by a spirit of divination, recognized Paul and Silas and started shouting to every body: *"These men are the servants of the Most high God, who proclaim to us the way of salvation"* (Ac-16, 16-17). This testimony provoked the fierce opposition of the girl's master, who obtained that Paul and Silas would be judged, beaten with rods and imprisoned (Ac 16, 19-24).

Fr. Michael Garicoïts was confronted to the pernicious consequences of jansenism, which saw in man a corrupted being, destined to make evil, and which considered that, without God's grace, man could only sin and disobey His will. Being near to the Jesuit School, Fr. Michael conceived Salvation as always possible for a man of good will. The catholic answer to that doctrine and spirituality also came with the cult of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, which focussed the Christians' attention on the importance of the humanity of Christ and of the Lord's mercy. Fr. Michael Garicoïts founded the Society of the Sacred Heart. He wanted it to be *"specially united to this divine Heart saying to his Father: 'Here I am', in order to be their collaborators to save the souls. Because it professes to imitate the life of Our Lord in a special way: since it forms members to live between themselves in this spirit of humility and charity, following the example of our Lord's disciples, and to conform themselves to this divine Saviour, mainly in his obedience to his Father."* (...) (DS § 7).

Having caught a glimpse of the values and counter-values of two different periods, attracted by the example of Paul who bears in his heart the Philippian community, we are ready to enter the christological hymn of the Letter to the Philippians. Waiting for the next biblical file, we can pray with Saint Francis of Assisi:

Oh Master, I don't seek so much to be comforted as to comfort,
to be understood that to understand,
to be loved as to love,
for it is when giving that one receives (...)
when forgiving that one is forgiven.
Amen.



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