

PHILIPPI and PHILIPPIANS

The Religious of the Sacred Heart of Jesus of Betharram like to consider the christologic hymn of the letter to the Philippians (2,6-11) as a foundation of their *“spirituality of Incarnation”*.

The founding text (Founder’s manifest) of the Rule of Life quotes the verse Ph. 2,8, and in the verse 22 it repeats the quotation, completing it: Christ *“abased himself, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross”*. (Ph. 2, 7-8).

It is interesting to take again and deepen the concepts of “service, self-abasement, humility, obedience”, the subjects of the next Biblical files ;

Do we want to be “mystics of the Incarnation”? Paul gives us his example: *“For me, living is Christ”* (Ph.1,21). *“But what things were gain to me (caste, circumcision, education, training, blind zeal, visceral fondness for his own culture and religion), these I have counted loss for Christ (...) for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ”* (Ph. 3, 7-8). To cast oneself aside and assume the condition of a servant asks for an interior condition and constancy in time (cf. Ph. 2, 7). *“Whatever things are true and noble, whatever things are pure, whatever things are worthy to be loved and honoured, whatever is called virtue and is praiseworthy, take all this into account”*. (Ph. 4,8).

During his missionary travels and in contact with other cultures, Paul has learnt the lesson: not to impose his Jewish faith and his Pharisian fanaticism to everybody. To announce the Good News, it was essential to pay attention to the social, cultural, political and religious environment, identifying their values and limits. Paul has become convinced that in each person, civilization and culture, there was already something right, good and just. It was the road to cover in order to touch the heart of those who showed some interest, disponibility, and an open heart and mind.

I- The context of Philippi.

Paul, born and brought up in Tarsus in a rich Jewish, Pharisian family, educated in the rabbinical

schools of Jerusalem, Roman citizen, is a mature man. He has a certain cultural knowledge but, after his conversion, he opens himself to the cultures of the peoples he met during his missionary travels, without ever imposing his own culture to other people, or obliging them to learn Hebrew. Paul has understood that in each person there are germs of goodness, beauty, religiosity and authentic values, even if they manifest themselves in different ways.

In Philippi, Paul grasps the positive aspects of the Greco-Roman culture.

- *Crenides-Philippi*, a splendid town. In 42 b.c. the town was known for its gold mines, exploited by the inhabitants of the island of Thasos who crowded there and by other people attracted by the gold rush. Conquered by the Romans, Crenides became Philippi in honour of Philip II in 168 b.c., who later developed the mining district. Wealth and profit are the reigning values.
- *Philippoi-Philippi*, a splendid town. In 42 b.c., it was the theatre of the war between the legions of Octavus and Anthony, on one side, and the legions of the defenders of the Republic, Brutus and Cassius, on the other side. The Praetorians of the triumvirate settled there, providing a new radiance to the town. Authoritarianism, feeling of superiority and sumptuousness are the imposed values.
- *Philippi*, with the crowning of Octavius taking the title of Caesar in 27 b.c., became one of the most important Roman colonies, considered as a Rome in miniature. Administered by magistrates elected by the local Senate, Philippi enjoyed several privileges, including the remission of taxes. The defence of civil and economical privileges was a concrete way of life.
- Philippi accepted the freedom of cult as a fact. Polytheism was less complicated and morally more free. The mysteries of Bacchus of Thrace revealed the idea of immortality, the cult of Sabazius included germs of monotheism and morally licentious rites. A group of Jews took advantage of this to settle in the town. They had been given the possibility of opening their own place of cult on the banks of the river Gangites. Freedom of cult and licentious ways were admitted and tolerated values .
- Philippi had become a multicultural town. In the Roman Empire, the Jews, as well as other peoples, adopted a second Greco-Latin name. Saül presented himself to the Philippians under the name of Paul. Saül reminded him of the first king of Israël, the figure of the powerful king rejected by God, humiliated and abandoned; this name was shameful and did not evoke well the humility of the disciple asked by Jesus. Paul felt himself « small » in front of the Christ who had conquered him. The ability to adapt oneself is a value for the missionary.

II- The Christian community of Philippi

The nucleus of the Church was moving from Jerusalem, predominantly Judeo-centered, towards “the extremities of the earth”, centered on Greece. Paul has “arrived in Troas to announce the Gospel of Christ, the door was wide open (for him) in the Lord, but (...) *“I started for Macedonia”* (2 Cor, 2,12-13) without delay after a dream and an invitation.

He did not hesitate to cross the Egean sea, without shrinking in front of the difficulties of logistics and safety. *“From Troas, we reached the open sea and sailed right towards the island of Samothrace, then, on the next day, towards Philippi”*. (Acts 16, 11-12). He was choosing important sites as a springboard from where the Good News would be able to spread. Philippi was one of them.

- *First step*: to meet the people of his own country. Paul went to the place where he thought that the Jews had settled and were praying. (Acts 16, 13) It was and it is normal that a foreigner,

to feel less lonely and out of place, goes and meets people of his own country and culture, to speak the same language and share the same faith with them.

- *Second step*: To spot the sympathisers. Paul meets Lydia, a merchant of purple fabrics, native of Thiatira, a sympathiser of the Jewish religion. *“The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul. And then, when her and her household were baptized, she begged us saying: » If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay ».* (Acts 16, 14-15) Lydia knows what it is to travel for work and open a trade in a town where a ferocious competition is reigning. The culture of profit was prevailing : some were looking for gold, others bought and sold silk, others as well opened import-export firms. Corruption and fraud were a way of life. Perhaps Lydia was sick of this ? Her frustration predisposed her to accept the novelty proposed by Paul, and to deepen the subject, she welcomes the missionary in her home; Thanks to the availability of this rich woman, the first community of the disciples of the Lord in Europe takes place in her house.

- *Third step*: to make more relative the values and frauds which are not in accordance with the Good News. Paul starts his ministry in such a way: he denounces the deceitful divination and the licentious manners ; he frees those possessed by the spirit of falsehood and are engaged by the civil and religious power to sow zizania and discord. Paul knows that speaking of the true values of life exposed him to persecution: whipping, prison and expulsion. Even in prison, Paul succeeds in converting his jailer and all his household, and all are filled with joy to have believed in God.

III- The way towards evangelization in Paul's letter to the Philippians.

- Once he has understood God's aim, Paul changes his evangelizing plan: the program is new and the direction changes. God enters man's history. The Holy Spirit is the protagonist of evangelization without ever getting round men's mediation, by soliciting them in various ways.
- The letter emphasizes the dimension of human collaboration. To come to Philippi means a cultural challenge for Paul: he does not know the Latin culture. A familiarity is born from the relationship, Paul's small group establishes a non-formal talk: it is a seed sowed, in the hope of making Christ known and loved.
- A good-hearted woman, Lydia, is ready for listening to transcendence, for a deeper understanding of faith. The conversion, the Lord's initiative, disposes the person, in the deepest of her being, to adhere to faith through two fundamental elements: the announcement of the message and the disponibility of soul, heart and spirit.
- The life in faith finds a significant contribution from families: their homes can be important places where one prays, practises hospitality and fraternity. There, the believers encourage one another and deepen together their knowledge of God and of themselves, to grow spiritually and humanly.

IV- Betharramite memory

To make an act of memory is not only to remember the past. It is to know the stories of the past so that those stories become ours. It means feeling empathy with what happened, so that consequently, we may change ourselves.

Saint Michael sent missionaries to Latin America to revive faith and religious practise among the Basque emigrants, who only cared about material profit, and were unable to communicate

with the Christian community because they did not know the local language.

The French anti-clerical laws, suppressing the religious congregations and expelling the religious from France, were the opportunity to make Saint Michaël's charism known outside the Basque and Bearn surroundings. Charism is always a gift for the whole Church.

Our missionaries sent to China, Thailand, Ivory Coast, Morocco, Algeria, India, Vietnam, are attractive and cheering examples of opening to the needs of local churches, of inculturation while respecting the peoples they meet, of being able to be near without judging, but by listening and proposing something new and beautiful.

V- For the personal and communitary reflection

Today, we are all dominated by the dictature of religious and moral relativism, by the blind search for an immediate economical and scientific result, by the loss of feeling personal good and common good. Near those who, in their identity and affirmation of their liberty, have gone far from God, have lost themselves and have become "strangers to themselves", we, religious of the Sacred Heart, are we still able to intensify our efforts to help each one to search God and to feel always loved by Him? How, and with what attitude, do we do it?

"We express our fidelity to the Church by being entirely available for her service." (RL. 17)?

"we wish to share in the "joys and hopes, the sadness and the anguish of men." (RL. 18)?

We are *"sensitive to the needs of our contemporaries in close and humble contact with their lives."* (RL. 18)?

"We seek in other religions and cultures, those longings for God": raggi di verità, le ricchezze dispensate da Dio e quanto di buono si trova nel cuore e nella mente degli uomini o nei riti e culture proprie dei popoli? (cfr.RL. 129)

While waiting for other Biblical reflections on the christologic hymn of the letter to the Philippians, let us pray with Saint Paul VI :

« O Lord, make my faith whole... free... certain... strong... cheerful... active ».



Societas S^{mi} Cordis Jesu
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