

How do the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd form Jesus in their life and in their mission today ?

It is both in the constant contemplation of the Heart of Jesus and, after his example, in our commitment on the paths of compassion that the Holy Spirit will form in us Jesus the Saviour the Incarnation of the Father's Mercy.

Thirty years ago, this text was presented to the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity as a following up of what Saint John Eudes asked them to live in the Church; almost four hundred years after him, it can give us some orientation about the way of forming Jesus in our life and our mission today.

It is first about 'contemplating the Heart of Jesus.' In doing so, we become more and more aware of the burning love of Jesus for each one of us, his merciful compassion towards those who feel lost, or who are considered as lost by those around them. Such contemplation is the first step to take in order to be animated by the Spirit of Jesus, to walk in his ways, to be clothed with his sentiments and inclinations, which is expected from whoever has become a member of Jesus' Body through Baptism.

Spending time with Jesus, drinking from the spring of his Heart to learn compassion, to become imbued with the thoughts, sentiments and affections of the Good Shepherd, as St Mary Euphrasia would say 200 years after St John Eudes her Father: this is an essential step in the school of the formation of Jesus.

Contemplation of Jesus in his Heart should be 'constant'! This means daily journeying with Jesus, becoming a disciple, learning from him, from his ways, his attitudes, his words. It means letting go of our selfishness, our self-centeredness, to make him the real center of our life ... A life journey, indeed!

In his letter to the Philippians (Ph 2: 5), Paul wrote what he wished them to live: "Make your own the mind of Christ Jesus." This is much more than imitating from outside, it is about thinking, feeling, acting like Jesus; said in other words, as St John Eudes did, it is about continuing the life of Jesus. He would even say that each one of us must be another Jesus on earth!

And to allow us going forward along this way, Paul added two orientations: "May Christ live in your hearts through faith; may you be planted in love and built on love" (Eph 3, 17). To belong to Jesus, to stick to him through faith, to trust him, and to be rooted in him through love, to build our life on him: such a process begins at Baptism, and for us, in religious life, it is confirmed through our commitment in the vows. For John Eudes, this commitment is nothing else that a commitment to live Jesus' life.

That is also what the text we started with invites us to do: 'After the example of Jesus, of his Heart, commit ourselves on the paths of compassion.' This is the second step we are called to; however, to undertake it, we do not have to wait until the first step is completed, because we well know it is not enough to be only looking at Jesus...

When the Son of God became one of us, member of our humankind, his human life lasted only for some years. “Risen,” from the dead, he [Jesus] wanted us to continue his presence in our world today; he wants us to embody him in our own lives, and to recognize his presence in each one of those we meet around us, to serve him in all those who suffer today.

Faith and love taken from the source of the Heart of Jesus have to be incarnated in our daily living, in our attitudes, in our decisions. As St Paul wrote to the Ephesians, “our mind has to be renewed in spirit, so that we can put on the New Being that has been created on God’s principles, in the uprightness and holiness of the truth” (Eph 4: 23-24). Uprightness, holiness, and truth can only become visible after discernment in the light of the Gospel, often with the help of others. How to be true in such encounter, how to be just in a complex situation? How to allow the holiness of God to challenge my daily life?

Our active participation in the formation of Jesus in us is not something out of our life, added to our commitments. It is within our daily life that we need, like Mary did, to “keep in our heart” the events and situations, so that we may go beyond appearances, and discover the signs of God’s presence and action in our lives, in the life of people we meet and serve. It is in our daily lives and ministries that we need to embody Jesus’ love and compassion.

Only a few examples of what is being done in our communities throughout the world:

- For more than 10 years, in a Good Shepherd Centre located in a poor area of Beirut, our sisters have been welcoming children, most of them refugees, who only have the street to play on; in the Centre, they are proposed activities, and at the same time their mothers find a place where they can talk freely and be listened to.
- In Peru, our Sr. Aguchita was a Good News’ messenger, the Good News of mercy, forgiveness, unity, the Good News of women’s dignity, until she was killed by a group of young terrorists in 1990.
- Over the 72 countries where the Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd is present: many of our sisters are fighting against human trafficking in order to promote the inalienable dignity of all human beings, as well as reconciliation among peoples and nations. Many are also working at welcoming migrants and asylum seekers always more numerous, helping them to settle in a new country and fighting for their dignity.
- In Congo / Kolwesi, for the last seven years, a small group of our sisters has been working hard along with people around them in order to free women and children from working in the coltan mines and to allow them to get an education and a better life.

In doing so, do we contribute to the formation of Jesus? Surely in ourselves, letting our hearts and actions be molded in the image of Jesus, his compassionate mercy, his caring presence. Through being witnesses of the saving love of God for suffering people, we also believe that we prepare their hearts to recognize his presence whenever the time comes for that! It does not belong to us, but to God to make himself known.

In fact, in order to go forward in such a journey, we are aware that the essential in the formation of Jesus is to give ourselves to the Spirit of Jesus, as Mary did. “Be guided by the Spirit,” said Paul to the Galatians (Gal 5: 16). That is exactly what Mary did all her life long.

Likewise, when St John Eudes talked about forming Jesus in us, he advised us to look at Jesus in everything, to keep him alive in our hearts through love: we can take this challenge only through the action of the Holy Spirit in us. In this, Mary our Mother is a good teacher: she has been given to us as a mother, especially to collaborate with the Holy Spirit in this work of the formation of Jesus in us, and through us, in people; we try to help and support. How often, for example, have we seen women trapped into prostitution making the decision to stop after living the experience of a bath in the holy water at Lourdes during a pilgrimage with people journeying with them, praying for them, including our own sisters!

St John Eudes told us strongly that we are in a special way the daughters of the Heart of Mary that she is committed herself with us in our specific mission! He said: You are the daughters of the Heart of Mary because your vocation to work for the salvation of lost souls comes in a special way from the most loving Heart of Jesus, which is one with his Mother. "For our Saviour came into the world not for the just but for the sinners" ... Therefore you must strive to imprint in your hearts an image and perfect likeness of her most holy life and virtues.

Like Mary, the first disciple of Jesus, we need to keep in our heart all that the Lord is doing for us, all the people we meet in our ministries and who are met by his healing love through us : this 'keeping in our heart' will allow us to grow towards unconditional love, lasting patience, and hope beyond human hope. We believe this is the way Jesus is forming himself in us and acting in the hearts of the people we meet.

When our first sisters were afraid of facing their demanding ministry with the wounded women, John Eudes wrote to them: "You have one and the same vocation with the Mother of God. For, just as God chose to form his Son within her, and in the hearts of the faithful through her, so too he called you to the holy community in which you are now, so that his Son might live in you, and through you restore him to life again in the souls in which he had been allowed to die."

If we remember this message, we should not be afraid of committing fully in our mission, whatever ministry is entrusted to us. We should not forget either that, each time we partake in the Eucharistic celebration, we receive the Body of Christ as Mary did, we become the Body of Christ, welcoming all his members in our life. Therefore we are gradually made 'channels of his mercy and communion'. It is not our work! It is the grace of God, the Spirit of God working in us and through us! The Bread of life has a transforming power!

Sr Marie-Françoise Le Brizaut

February, 2018