

Congregational Leader's Gospel Reflection

When speaking with our youth recently, Pope Francis referred to the Beatitudes (Mt. 5) as a program of life offered to us by Jesus; the identity card of the Christian! It is an action plan! But, he said, if we are searching for more, Jesus gives us other indications in Matthew Chapter 25, which has been proclaimed here today. With these two things, adds Pope Francis, "one can live a holy, Christian life."

We Sisters of Charity celebrating this year 200 years of our Foundation in Ireland in 1815 see Matthew 25 as our mandate to love and serve the poor. Our Constitutions and our Fourth Vow of Service of the Poor show us the way. Our Foundress, Mary Aikenhead was steeped in love of the poor from an early age and her father had a great love for the poor in an Ireland that was ravaged by sickness and poverty. Mary Aikenhead referred to the poor as God's nobility and a familiar saying of hers was "There can be no charity, where there is not respect for the poor." The King in today's Gospel reminds us of the practical ways we can put our love into action and you might say these are the foundation stones of the many ministries of service of the poor our Sisters, the Sisters of Mercy, the Jesuits and so many other religious women and men have been involved in over the centuries.

Our Constitutions are quite clear about the central place of the poor in the lives of our Sisters: Continuing the Charism of Mary Aikenhead, we give expression to our love of God and neighbor by our fourth vow....our charism is to bring to each person the love, tenderness and concern of Christ for the poor, seeing Christ in everyone we serve.

In the early years of our Congregation when a woman presented for Clothing in the habit of a Sister of Charity and Reception into the Congregation there were some symbolic actions that were part of our Ceremony. Wanting to emphasise to the new Sister of Charity the primacy of love for the poor, a young child representing the orphaned-poor, presents the newly received with an apron and a key. The apron was to be the mark of honorable service with the conviction that it is to Jesus Christ himself they render humble services. They are asked to kiss the key presented to them by the hand of the poor orphan and to let this key remind them that it is the poor who are to open to them the mansions of eternal glory and give access to the Kingdom of Heaven, for it is theirs. So with great faith and eagerness we Sisters of Charity continue to hold dear our Fourth Vow and try to practice it wholeheartedly. It is this reading today that the Church puts before us to remind us quite clearly who are the poor.

It is one thing to serve the poor and needy, but Pope Francis urges us to do everything with joy. He says: "...an evangelizer must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral! Let us recover and deepen our enthusiasm, that delightful and comforting joy of evangelizing..." (Evangelli Gaudium No 10)

Proclaiming Christ means showing that to believe in and to follow him is not only something right and true, but also something beautiful, capable of filling life with new splendour and profound joy even in the midst of difficulties. (EG 167)

The central theme of today's Gospel is the kingdom of God. Jesus himself IS the kingdom of God in person; he is Emmanuel, God with us. It is in our human hearts that God takes root and the Kingdom grows. The kingdom is both gift and promise. It has already been given to us but it has yet to be realized in its fullness. May we always pray "Your kingdom come" in all that we do.

We can all formulate a written statement which proclaims the ways we put today's Gospel into action and I conclude with the statement of the Sisters of Charity which is our driving force in today's world to put the Gospel into practice today:

We are Sisters of Charity, women of Mary Aikenhead, contemplatives in action, impelled by the love of Christ. We live the joy of the Gospel. We respond courageously to the call to mission, going out to the margins, walking in partnership with others.

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