

ELIZABETH PROUT – MOTHER MARY JOSEPH

CITIZEN WITH A DISCIPLE’S HEART

IN THE SERVICE OF THE PROJECT OF THE KINGDOM

INTRODUCTION

Thank you for the chance to share our journey along Mother Mary Joseph’s steps from the Latin American communities, specifically from Argentina. She has been and still is a crucial role model for our life and mission. We see her as a pioneer in this journey to become a believer and a citizen in her time and a religious woman in the church that was beginning to revive in those days.

From the present perspective we see her, contemplate her in the light of the Closing Document of the V Episcopal Conference of Latin America and the Caribbean, Aparecida, 2007. And I have been inspired by the Reflection with which the then Archbishop of Buenos Aires, Mons. Jorge Bergoglio, opened the Meeting on Urban Ministry, in 2011. It was based on Chapter 10 of the Document of Aparecida entitled “Our peoples and culture”, included in Urban Ministry.

Faced with the question: What does being a believer in the city mean? We begin our reflection noticing that there are many ways of looking at it. And the glass through which we look determines the way we face life if we wish to carry out our Mission of being “Memory of the Love of God that reaches its greatest expression in the Cross.”

I wonder how many times must Mother Mary Joseph have read and allowed herself to be challenged by the life-project that Jesus proposed to us in the Beatitudes, the basic citizenship card in the New Alliance! Elizabeth Prout learnt to look at life through faith when very young and she gradually spelt the Voice of the Spirit in most adverse circumstances. Her profound desire to be faithful to what the Spirit showed her is the reason why today we know her as Mother Mary Joseph and why she is a role model of religious Passionist woman.

DEVELOPMENT

In our Congregational Constitutions, No. 5, we read: “Elizabeth Prout and her earlier companions came together to give themselves to God in the religious state. Under the direction of to Passionists, Fathers Gaudentius Rossi and Ignatius Spencer, they lived out their consecrated lives in the service of the poor in the industrial towns of nineteenth century England. Tempered by suffering and sustained by holy joy, Mother Mary Joseph risked all to build a community founded on trust, love and service. It is from this dedicated ecclesial woman that we receive our special heritage to love and serve the poor and afflicted”.

It is clearly stated that the inception of our Community happened in the industrial city, in its peripheries and with a special commitment to those we currently call the excluded, the marginalized, immigrants who must leave their land in order to survive.

Being a citizen in a large city is very complex. Race and culture relationships are not homogeneous nor do all the inhabitants share civil rights. There are numerous 'non citizens', 'half citizens' and 'surplus' because they do not enjoy full rights or because they do not fulfil their duties.

The transcendent perspective of faith that leads to respect and love for our neighbour, helps us to “choose” to become citizens of a particular city and to engage in attitudes and behaviour that foster citizenship. Yes, that is it, we can CHOOSE WHAT TYPE OF CITIZEN WE WISH TO BECOME. And it is our faith that shows us how to choose.

We should start by contemplating Jesus of Nazareth. Zacchaeus, Bartimaeus, the Haemorrhissa (an unnamed woman). Each one of these encounters with these persons who until their contact with Jesus were considered “non citizens” was extraordinarily fertile. When people come into contact with the Lord they are filled with bursting life, and that life grows in every detail, improving life in the city too. (This still happens in our time.)

The Document from Aparecida states that “God dwells in the city”. This certainty fills us with trust and missionary resolution. It invites us to “re-start from our encounter with Christ” (Ap. 12) -and not from ethicist or enlightened stances- our connection with those living in the existential peripheries of our cities.

Let us read No. 514 and turn it into prayer:

*“Faith teaches us that God lives in the city,
in the midst of its joys, desires and hopes,
as well as in its pains and sufferings.*

*The shadows that emerge in cities daily,
Such as violence, poverty, individualism and
exclusion, Cannot stop us from searching and
contemplating The God of life, in urban environments
also.*

Cities are sites of freedom and opportunity.

*People can meet other people, connect, and live with them. In cities it
is possible to experience relationships of brother/sisterhood,
interact and live with others.*

In cities it is possible to try to establish relationships of

Fraternity, solidarity and universality.

In their midst, human beings are constantly being called

To walk ever more to meet others,

To share life with those who are different, accept them and be accepted by them.”

Faith teaches us that God lives in the city. Lacking this foundational and absolute guide mark, the reality of the city breaks down and dilutes into thousands of details with no history or identity. What is the purpose of a city if it is not focused on a faith that is open to the eternal? Seeing reality requires the sight of faith, the sight of a believer. Otherwise, reality becomes fragmented. Neither science, politics, the economy nor the media may provide a unified and full meaning of human life. Only in Christ Word, Wisdom of God, can culture and the city manage to find their focus and deepness.

Mother Mary Joseph discovered nearly two centuries earlier what Aparecida proposes and suggests for a new urban ministry: go out to meet others, walk by them and become leaven. When we revisit Mother Mary Joseph's life under this light, her experience as a woman of faith, we discover that she walked her walk in Manchester City with that look of faith open to the transcendent, that she reached out to meet the “non citizens” of her time, she walked by their side and she was like leaven in a new reality in her city. She found her focus and deepness in the Crucified; strength and the wisdom of God for those who have received the gift of faith and Passionist spirituality.

We know she paid a very high price for that vital CHOICE. Because she followed the Crucified among the poor in Manchester she was unfairly accused. And even though she was found innocent of all those accusations, she was banished to anonymity like so many others to whom she wanted to give back what belonged to them as God's beloved children.

How did she manage to live and die seeking to be loyal to her call? We find the reply in that wonderful expression of the Beatitudes that describes the traits of the person who wishes to lead his life in accordance with the project of the Kingdom that Jesus brought to us. The Word of God that we have just heard in the Gospel.

Pope Francis tells us in his recent Apostolic Exhortation, *Gaudete et exsultate*:

“So if anyone asks: “What must one do to be a good Christian?” the answer is clear. We have to do, each in his own way, what Jesus told us in the Sermon of the Mount. **In the Beatitudes, we find the face of the Master, whom we are called to witness to in our everyday life. (63).**

And, “Although Jesus' words may strike us as poetic, they clearly run counter to the way things are usually done in our world. Even if we find Jesus's message attractive, the world pushes us

towards another life style. **The Beatitudes are in no way trite or undemanding, quite the opposite. We can only practise them if the Holy Spirit fills us with his power and frees us from our weakness, our selfishness, our complacency and our pride.” (65)**

“Let us listen once more to Jesus, with all the love and respect that the Master deserves. **Let us allow his words to unsettle us, to challenge us and to demand a real change in the way we live. Otherwise, holiness will remain no more than an empty word. (66).**

Conclusion

God dwells in the city; we are certain and that certitude urges us to go out to meet him to discover him, to weave relationships, to be close to them, to walk by their side in their growth and incarnate the leaven of God’s word in actual works. The perspective of faith GROWS when we put it into practice. Contemplation IMPROVES in action. Behaving as good citizens improves faith (Rm. 13:1). Truly living all things human, in any culture, in any city, improves Christians and enriches the city.

Faith combats the temptation of “not looking”, “not seeing”. Not looking corresponds to an abstract subject. The perspective of faith is that of a live agent who looks at live realities in whose midst God lives too. It leads us to go out each day and always meet our neighbour who lives in the city, because this perspective thrives in vicinity, in nearness. It cannot tolerate distance because it feels distance blurs what he wishes to see and faith wishes to see in order to serve and love. Not to check and dominate. Whoever says he believes in God and “does not see” his neighbour deceives himself.

The perspective of faith renews the hope of new encounters. Hope frees us from the centripetal force that easily leads us to live in isolation within the city, with exclusively virtual connections. When we commit ourselves we can work as leaven. And as life processes need time, we can walk along with others and let them walk with us.

At this moment in our history, humanity needs urgent witnesses of faith to GO OUT and SEE those who are in the peripheries of our cities. God is calling us from exclusion, from marginality. That is our mission today, this is how we understand it in Latin America: to prepare ourselves to go out to meet others in the way Mother Mary Joseph did.

I know many people, many women in Argentina, Chile and Perú who, after learning about our Passionist spirituality and Mother Mary Joseph’s testimony, have decided to devote their gifts and talents, showing infinite love, to find hundreds of creative ways to give back to the poor in our cities what belongs to them as children of God. They have CHOSEN TO SEE THEM and CREATE QUALITY LIFE SPACES FOR THEM. They are genuine testimonies of believers who, on the basis of their faith, have become citizens in these times following the example of Mother Mary Joseph.

May the bicentenary of the birth of Elizabeth Prout, Mother Mary Joseph, on September 2nd, 2020, find us following her example, living on the basis of our faith and offering ourselves with love.

So that wheat will grow where everybody sees thorns,
Where everybody sees garbage, we may discover whatever can be rescued,
For life to sprout where there is death.

"May the Memory of the Passion and the Dolors of Mary always remain in our hearts"

Mother Mary Joseph, pray for us.

Hna. Cecilia Duarte CP



Sutton, May 12th, 2018.