

OUR RECEPTION OF GOD'S GRACE

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Introduction

I have been asked to offer a reflection on the topic of "Our Reception of God's Grace", in the light of the Prologue of Saint John's gospel, and I am happy that I can now share it with you. This reflection will lead you into the perspective of announcing of the Good News, "*the true light, that enlightens every person*" (Jn 1:9). It also enters into the dynamics of World Mission Day with its theme: "*Missionary Church, Testimony of Mercy*". You are invited to look at mission *ad gentes* as one great, immense work of mercy, whether spiritual or material. But in what mode today do we, as religious, welcome in the Church this grace of God, the "*Word made flesh*" (Jn 1:14), and also welcome it into our lives, and into our missionary vocation? I can start from my experience as a Franciscan Missionary of Mary, where mission is fundamental to our charisma, and make an attempt to better understand what is meant by "the welcome we give to the grace of God". We will develop four points: the grace of faith as a gift, the grace of the religious life as an offering, the welcoming of the incarnate Word as mission, and the challenges before and the prospects of mission today.

1. The Grace of Faith as a Gift

Our reception of the grace of God springs from receiving the grace of faith, as a gift: "to all who did accept he gave power to become children of God" (Jn 1:12). Grace is the favour, the gratuitous assistance that God gives us, so that we can respond to his invitation by becoming his sons, participating in the divine nature. Faith is a profound reality in a human life. Christians receive faith as a gift, a gratuitous favour on the part of God. Christ manifests himself in the person who welcomes this faith, and he invites such a person to a life in the reign of God.

The Holy Father sent a message for World Mission Day, telling us that faith is indeed a gift of God and not the fruit of proselytism and preaching – though it can grow thanks to the faith and charity of evangelisers who are witnesses of Christ. Baptism makes us a fully a new creature in God and a member of the Church. So when we receive Baptism, we receive life in Jesus, as a favour, one that allows us to claim we are privileged. Grace is a participation in the life of God, leading us into the intimacy of the Trinitarian life. The Holy Spirit renews our faith, making us still more firm believers as we listen to the Word of God.

How do we receive other people, as God has received us in his grace? Do we welcome in faith every person whom the Lord puts beside us, in community, in mission, and in our work? Or do we turn only a human gaze on our relationships? To receive grace leads us to receive everyone, with an open heart. And this is even more necessary for missionaries called to give witness that Christ is for everybody. If we look with the eyes of faith at our experience of the personal life, we can with gratitude be convinced that the grace of God has always been present, in moments of joy and also in moments of difficulty. Faith is the finest grace that the Lord freely gives us, and which then requires our generous acceptance.

2. The Grace of the Religious Life as an Offering

A calling to the following of Christ is not something that happens by chance. It is a particular grace which we have received, so that every day we may be able to say: "Thank you Lord for having called me to follow you". The route that each of us has taken to become a religious has a history, a story of love with the author of our call. On some occasions, we might have the impression that our vocation sprang up by itself, that it came from our capacity, from our merits. No, it is he who is "The Word of God" who pushed us with his grace to say, yes, to his call. Prayer is the wellspring of grace which we welcome in every day of our consecrated life.

Religious life is a gift coming freely from God to our humble selves. The acceptance of this grace commits us to transforming our lives, and makes us into disciples of Christ. Pope Francis speaks of "*returning to Galilee*". *The place where the first call was made, where everything began! Returning to Galilee means to read again without anything from the foot of the cross and to the victory.*

Our acceptance of the grace of God is manifested through the evangelical counsels, all making up the heart of a profound experience of life with Christ. *Obedience* is what gives us the grace, with the mediation of the Gospel and of the constitutions, to put our will into the hands of the Lord. The choice of *Poverty* leads us for the love of Christ to possess nothing of our own, to become poor with the poor, and to be the voice of the voiceless. Chastity for the kingdom of God makes us choose Christ as the sole good companion. The example of Mary and her Yes to God is a model for every consecrated person: *“Here I am, the servant of the Lord, may what you have said be done to me”* (Lk 1:38).

The evangelical counsels are realised by a life in community. Community life is a particular grace that permits us to live in joy, in happiness, in service to the mission. We must not be selective in our lives in community, but welcome in faith a brother or a sister that the Lord gives to us. As missionary institutions, we have a particular grace – and it needs to be emphasised – of diversity and internationality in our community, and the grace of the difference of culture and experience. How do we welcome that precious gift, to give testimony to a fundamental reality of our charism? Saint Arnold Janssen, founder of the Society of the Divine Word, says it thus: *“[It is to] create a union with the Sisters, the Brothers who live out the same vocation and pronounce the same Word. To give a common testimony we need a concordance of listening. If we live the Trinity, the Spirit and the Word together, then we will be missionaries in depth. For this we not only have to do mission, but to be mission. We will be mission if we live what we are”*. These splendid words will remind everyone of the essential part played by fraternal life, and by a true sense of the mission.

3. The welcoming of the incarnate Word as mission

Evangelisation is a duty for every Christian. Some persons have received the grace of dedicating their own life to mission. Mission *ad extra* has in particular played a prominent role in the history of the Church. Many religious Congregations and Institutes hold mission like charisma. An example is the Divine Word missionaries; the Institute of the Franciscan missionaries of Mary, etc. The missionary vocation is an immeasurable grace, to be accepted with gratitude. It is to be harboured and renewed according to the signs of the times, facing the challenges of the world in which we live. Today we have more than ever a need for missionaries.

My small experience of mission in Burkina Faso, in Senegal, and in Italy has convinced me of the urgency of proclaiming the Word of God. The missionary vocation is a fire within, one which does not go out. All of us, oneself in particular, wherever we may be, whoever we are, no matter what we are doing, are continuing the mission. A grace is not received so as to lie asleep within us, but to be kept awake and alive. The people are thirsty for God. I have experienced the mission in various fields, first in pastoral activity in a parish, then in the media, and also in the teaching of Communication to students of the State University at Ouagadougou. I have felt the real urgency of mission. At the University, professors and students were keen to know who God is, to find the meaning of religion, of the life of the church, and to dig into the relations between Christians, Muslims, and the animists in the traditional religions of Africa. A thirst for spirituality is a reality in the world of research. I felt as if I was working more in the pastoral field rather than in that of education. The people and society always question our identity

We were able to visit almost all the dioceses of Burkina and also of Niger, by means of the Catholic TV station “TvMaria” and our team. These dioceses are part of the same Episcopal Conference. Wherever we went to shoot events for television, we felt the thirst for God among the people. There was a desire to see through religious films what was happening in the Church: on the Bible, the life of Christ, the lives of the saints, and current films of the Holy Father and the Vatican. Today more than ever we are able to do much for evangelisation with communications. In the words of Giovanni Sartori, we have come from *homo sapiens* to *homo videns*.

In various local churches, such as those in Africa, the dynamism of the Christian communities and their parishes stands out clearly. We were astonished at their enthusiasm to accept the grace of faith in Christ. Many are receiving the sacraments and all celebrate together this acceptance of the grace of God in their life. The involvement of the lay people in the life of the local Church is a grace which encourages the missionary to see that the word of God is taking root in the hearts of many people. Faced with this dynamism in faith, there comes a challenge of inculturation, and some space to deepen and consolidate among the faithful the roots of our faith. Another dimension which needs consolidation is a formation in Christian doctrine. We cannot lose sight of the reality of social

development in our missionary action to initiate the social transformation of many people, especially in the rural spaces and villages of developing countries.

The message of the World Mission Day is a persuasive one: *we all are invited to accept this call to come out of our personal comfort zone and to have courage to reach out to all the outside places which need the light of the Gospel.* What are we doing, and what more should we be doing, for the message of the “Incarnate Word” of God to be experienced and really spoken to today’s people and to our society? The Day consecrated to world-wide mission lays on us the duty of reflection about how to renew and move forward in our missionary spirit, into deep waters.

4. Challenges and prospects for mission today

Religious vocations, for mission: The mission requires workers, “*The harvest is rich but the labourers are few*” (Lk 10:2). But we are witnessing a drop generally in religious vocation and in particular in our different missionary Institutes. We are called to find ways and strategies to respond to the challenge of mission, and to adapt the way we do mission today. As religious we are also called to bring about changes, transformations, to renew our own life and our mission to become a testimony which can challenge today’s youth. Isn’t it the case perhaps that the stability and testimony of our lives can of itself influence the young to respond to the call of the Lord, and become missionaries themselves? To have some presence in their world is definitely another path to contacting them.

Pastoral outreach to the family: This has become a priority today in the field of pastoral activities. We have to get into this field. Today’s society is changing the nature and perspective of family with a variety of views which cause perplexity. Wherever we may be as missionaries, we are called to give a priority to the pastoral care of families. From families come vocations: it is a missionary duty to sustain the family along the lines laid out in the synod on the family.

Interreligious dialogue and relations with other religions: This is a reality to be approached from a missionary perspective. Today religious fundamentalism is a challenge to the mission of evangelisation. Terrorism is perhaps caused by a distorted vision of religion, springing in some people from an erroneous conception of God. But there are other causes – injustice, economic interests, the sale and the proliferation of arms. How can the missionary Congregations and Institutes bring people to the values of the Gospel and the way to peace, to dialogue among religions?

The Massive immigration of populations, faced with war and fundamentalist terrorism, has become part of the priorities of mission today. The Church is present in this field, and Pope Francis is the greatest upholder of the necessity of understanding this phenomenon, this sign of the times. What can missionaries today do about this human tragedy? What is the role of the mission institutions? The great waves of incoming people, the Brexit decision in England, the shutting of national frontiers – these leave us disappointed and frustrated. What can we do together?

The situation of women: What have we been doing up to now as missionaries? “Femicide” is spreading in a worrying way, causing unheard of sufferings to and the death of so many defenceless women. So far there has not been a vigorous effort to combat and eradicate this phenomenon. As missionaries we are forced to break the silence covering up this sad reality, one which is often brought before our eyes by the media. Faced with this situation, what can we do? What concrete action can we take, wherever we are, in this matter?

Justice and peace, safeguarding the creation: This is a very current matter. Today the world is trying to live in peace. There is no peace without justice, the centre point of so many wars, and of so much violence. Nature is suffering the malevolent actions of humans. There is much on this in “Laudato Si”, the Pope’s encyclical, laying out the sense of responsibility which we all have to look after “the common house”. What missionary action is necessary when we are faced with this concern?

Communications and the new technologies: How do these means of communication fit into a missionary activity? Communicate means to share, and sharing requires listening, acceptance. “*It has the power to build bridges, to favour meetings and inclusion, and so, to enrich society*”. (*Daily world message of social communications*, 2016). Going beyond the long-standing classical activities in this area, missionaries are called today to announce the Gospel with the new media, giving particular attention to youth and children via an education about how to make correct use of such media. To be

able to interact with these means of communication we have to undergo some more formation. It is now our duty to transmit the Word of God, beyond frontiers.

Conclusion

By exploring the theme of our acceptance of the grace of God we have been able, in the light of the prologue of Saint John, to reflect on the meaning of a missionary vocation as religious, as members of our various institutions dedicated to mission in the Church and in the world. We have seen that the goodness of God is limitless, and begins with the gift of faith in our lives as children of God, through baptism. As well as this, the Lord has called us, and has consecrated our whole life, by his love, towards the service of our brothers. We have received the grace of mission as messengers to the ends of the earth of the Good News. "*Indeed, from his fullness we have, all of us, received – yes, grace in return for grace*". (Jn 1:16) Let us be grateful to Christ to the end of our lives for this beautiful and immensely rich grace that he has given us our missionary vocation.