

THAT ALL MAY BE SAVED

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Our Christian vocation, which is a personal call from our Lord, leads us to become one with him. But we should not forget that he came to this earth to redeem everyone, because he wishes all men to be saved (cf I Tim 2:4). There is no soul in whom Christ is not interested. Each one has cost him the price of his blood (cf Pet 1:18-19).

As I consider these truths, I am reminded of a conversation between the twelve and the Master, a few moments before the multiplication of the loaves. A great crowd had followed Jesus, who raises his eyes and asks Philip: 'Where shall we buy bread that these may eat' (Jn 6:5)? After making a quick calculation, Philip answers: 'Two hundred denarii worth of bread

is not enough for them, that each may receive a little' (Jn 6:7). They do not have enough money; another solution must be found. 'One of his disciples, Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter, said to him: 'There is a young boy here who has five barley loaves and two fishes; but what are these among so many?' (Jn 6:8-9).

The Leaven

We want to follow our Lord. We are anxious to spread his word. Humanly speaking, it is logical that we should ask the same question: what are we, who are we, among so many people? In comparison with the population of the world, we are numerically insignificant, even if we were several million strong. But numbers do not matter; our fidelity does. Consequently we must see our role as that of yeast, leaven. We must be prepared, ready to do good to all mankind, seconding the words of the Apostle: 'a little leaven ferments the whole mass' (1 Cor 5:6), transforming it completely. To transform the people

around us we must change, becoming leaven, active yeast.

Is yeast better, by its nature, than flour? No. But yeast is the means by which flour is modified in becoming a good and nourishing food. In general terms at least, think about the effective action of the yeast, used in making bread – a simple food within the means of everyone. In many places – possibly you have seen it yourselves – there is a real ceremony involved in making good bread that you can almost taste with your eyes.

The flour they choose is good, the best available. A long and patient task follows. First the yeast is thoroughly worked into the flour. Then a time of rest, without which the yeast would not do its job and make the dough rise.

Meanwhile the stove is lit and the desired temperature reached. The heat converts the dough into tender, spongy bread, wonderful to taste. The result would have been impossible without a small amount of yeast. But it must be mixed into the flour and disappear in the dough, working effectively, hiddenly.

If we consider St Paul's image spiritually, we will understand that our appointed role is to work in the service of all souls. Anything else would be selfish. If we humbly look at our own lives, we will clearly see that our Lord, in addition to the gift of faith, has also given us a number of talents and qualities. None of us has been mass-produced. Each of us was uniquely created by our Father, who endows each of his children with a number of particular gifts. It is up to us to develop and use these talents, these qualities, in serving all men. We are called to use these gifts of God as instruments to help others discover Christ.

Do not think that this apostolic mission is a kind of ornamental addition to our Christian life. If yeast is not used, it rots. It can disappear by giving life to the mass, but it can also disappear by being wasted, in a monument to selfishness and barrenness. We are not doing Jesus a favour when we make him known to others. 'Even if I preach the gospel, I have herein no ground for boasting, since I am under constraint, by Christ's command; for woe is me if I do not preach the gospel!' (1 Cor 9:16).

The Fisherman's Task

'Behold, I will send many fishermen, says the Lord, and they shall fish them' (Jer 16:16). We should see this great task of ours as a work of fishermen. In conversation or in writings, people sometimes compare the world to a sea. And rightly so. In our life there are alternately times of calm and stormy seasons, periods of serenity and high winds. Often men must swim in bitter waters, in the midst of heavy seas. They travel through storms, in a journey that is frequently marked by sorrow – even when people seem to be happy, if judged by appearances only. But their laughter is only a cover for their discouragement, their disgust; their lives are bereft of charity and understanding. Men, like fish, devour each other.

The task of God's children is to lead all men to enter freely into the divine nets, where they can love each other. If we are Christians, we must become fishermen described by the prophet Jeremiah – a metaphor Jesus also used frequently: 'Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men' (Mt 4:19), he says to Peter and Andrew.

We can go to our Lord and learn from him about our task as fishermen. Jesus was standing by Lake Genesareth and 'the crowds were pressing upon him to hear the word of God' (Lk 5:1). You see? Just like now! They want to hear God's message, although they might hide their desire. Some may have forgotten Christ's doctrine. Others – through no personal fault – never learned it; consequently they think of religion as something alien to them. And yet, you can be sure of this: there always comes a time when a soul cannot go on, when it is not satisfied with the usual explanations, and when the lies of the false prophets fall apart. Then, although they might not admit it, such persons feel a thirst for our Lord's teaching which can bring their search to an end.

St Luke tells us: 'He saw two boats moored by the lake, but the fishermen had left them and were washing their nets. And getting into one of the boats, the one that was Simon's, he asked him to put out a little from the land. And sitting down, he began to teach the crowds from the boat' (Lk 5:2-3). When he had finished his instruction he told Simon: 'Put out into the deep, and lower your nets for a catch' (Lk 5:4). Christ is the master of the boat. He directs the catch. He has come to the world to enable his brothers to find their way to eternal happiness and love for the Father. Christian apostolate is not something we men invented. If anything, we get in the way, with our clumsiness, with our lack of faith.

'And Simon answered and said to him, 'Master, the whole night through we have toiled and have taken nothing'' (Lk 5:5). It sounds like a reasonable response. The night hours were the usual time for fishing; and, on that night, all their work had been fruitless. How were they to fish in the daytime? But Peter has faith: 'At your word I will lower the nets' (Lk 5:5). He decides to follow Christ's command; he commits himself to believe in our Lord's word and act accordingly. And what happens? 'When they had done so, they enclosed a great number of fishes, but their net was breaking. And they beckoned to their comrades in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink' (Lk 5:6-7).

When Jesus had gone out on the lake with his disciples, he was not only thinking about this catch. And so when Peter falls down at his feet and humbly tells him, 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord,' our Lord answered, 'Do not be afraid; henceforth you will be a fisher of men' (Lk 5:10). And God's grace will make this new task effective. The apostles became instruments of great wonders, in spite of their personal weaknesses.

Miracles will come about

If we make a daily effort to become saints, each of us in his own state in the world and in the exercise of his profession, in our ordinary lives, I have no doubt that our Lord will enable us to work miracles, and, if necessary, miracles of the most extraordinary kinds.

We will give sight to the blind. I could tell you of countless souls, blind almost from birth, who have recovered their sight, who have received all the splendour of the faith of Christ. And others who were deaf or dumb, incapable of hearing or saying a single word as children of God. And their senses became clean, and now they can hear and talk as men and not as animals. *In nomine Iesu*: 'In the name of Jesus' (Acts 3:6), the apostles gave new life to the crippled man who was unable to perform any useful task. And in the name of the Lord, we will be able to tell that useless man who knows his duties but does not want to fulfill them, *Surge et ambula*: 'Arise and walk' (Acts 3:6). And in the same way that other man, whose soul is dead and stinks of corruption, will be able to hear the voice of God — just as in the miracle of the widow's son at Naim: 'Young man, I say to you, arise' (Lk 7:14).

Miracles like those done by Christ, like the miracles his first apostles worked, we too will be able to perform. Maybe you yourself, or I, have benefited from such wonders — maybe we were blind or deaf or crippled. Maybe we were dead and decaying and our Lord's word has raised us up. If we love Christ, if we follow him sincerely, if we look, not for ourselves, but for him, we shall be able in his name to pass on freely what we have received freely.

I have preached constantly about the human and supernatural possibility that our Father God puts in his children's hands — the opportunity to share in the redemption brought by Christ. And I am filled with joy when I realize that this doctrine is found in writings of the Fathers of the Church. St Gregory the Great explains: 'Christians conquer serpents, when they root out evil from the heart of others by exhorting them to good. . . , they lay their hands on the sick and cure them, when they see that their neighbour is weakening in the practice of good, and they help him in many different ways, strengthening him with their example. These miracles are all the greater because they take place in spiritual things and bring life, not to bodies, but to souls. You too, if you do not lose your strength, will be able to work these wonders, with the help of God' (1).

God wants all men to be saved. His will is an invitation and a responsibility that falls on everyone of us. The Church is not a refuge for the privileged. 'Is the great Church only a small part of the earth? The great Church is the whole world' (2). That is how St Augustine describes it. And he adds: 'wherever you go, there is Christ. Your inheritance reaches to the ends of the earth; come, take possession of it with me' (3). Do you remember the nets? They were full and overflowing — it was impossible to have a greater catch of fish. God is anxiously waiting for his whole

house to be filled (cf Lk 14:23). He is a Father and wants to have his children all around him.

Apostolate in daily life

Let us consider the second catch of fish as well. It was after Jesus' passion and death. Peter had denied the Master three times. He later wept in humble sorrow when the cock's crowing reminded him of our Lord's prediction. From the bottom of his heart he asked to be forgiven. In his sorrow he waits for the promise of the resurrection. Meanwhile he goes to do his work. He goes fishing, 'With regard to this catch of fish, we are often asked why Peter and the sons of Zebedee returned to the task they had before our Lord called them. They were, in fact, fishermen, when Jesus told them: "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." To those who are surprised at this manner of acting, we must answer that it was not forbidden to the apostles to exercise their profession, because it was a legitimate and just thing to do' (4).

The apostolic concern that burns in the heart of an ordinary Christian is not something apart, distinct from his everyday tasks. It is part and parcel of one's daily work, when that work is made the repeated occasion for personal encounters with Christ. In the midst of our ordinary occupations, as we work side by side with our colleagues, with our friends, with our relatives, as we follow the same aspirations, we will be able to help them come closer to Christ, who is waiting for us on the shore. Before he was an apostle Peter was a fisherman. He was a fisherman afterwards too: the same profession, before and after.

What is the difference? The difference is that Christ has come into his soul, just as he stepped into Peter's boat. The soul now sees a wider horizon, it feels a greater ambition to serve. It is filled with irrepressible desires to announce, to all creation, the *magnalia Dei* (Acts 2:11): the great things our Lord does, if we let him. Although I mention it only in passing, I cannot help adding that, for a priest, his *professional work* — if we can call it that — is a *divine and public ministry*, which demands all his time and attention. Consequently, as a rule, if a priest has time to spare for other occupations not pertaining to the priesthood, he can be sure he is not fulfilling the duties of his vocation.

'There were together Simon Peter and Thomas, called the Twin, and Nathaniel, from Cana in Galilee, and the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing". They said to him, "We also are going with you." And they went out and got into the boat. And that night they caught nothing. But when day was breaking, Jesus stood on the beach' (Jn 21:2-3).

He comes close to the apostles, men who have given themselves to him, but who do not realize he is there. How many times Christ is not only near us, but *in us* — yet we still live in such a human way! Christ is so close to us, and we can't spare him an affectionate look, a loving word, a good deed born of our zeal for souls.

“The disciples,” writes St John, “did not know that it was Jesus. Then Jesus said to them, “Young men, have you any fish?” (Jn 21:5). I’m impressed when I read these words of Christ. He is God, and he says this: he whose body is already glorified!

“Cast the net to the right of the boat and you will find them.” They cast therefore, and now they were unable to draw it up for the great number of fishes’ (Jn 21:6). Now they understand. They recall what they have heard so often from their Master’s lips – fishers of men, apostles. And they understand that all things are possible, because he is the one who directs their fishing.

“The disciple whom Jesus loved said therefore to Peter, “It is the Lord”’ (Jn 21:7). It is his love that enables John to see Jesus even at a distance. Love makes one able to appreciate another person’s affection. That apostle, an adolescent, felt a strong affection for Jesus: He loved him with all the purity and all the strength of a heart that had remained unsullied. With his acute vision he could say, ‘It is the Lord!’

‘Simon Peter therefore, hearing that it was the Lord, girt his tunic about him. . . and threw himself into the sea’ (Jn 21:7). Peter has faith; he leaps into the sea in a show of daring. With a love like John’s and a faith like Peter’s, what is there that can stop us?

Souls belong to God

‘But the other disciples came with the boat (for they were not far from land, only about two hundred cubits), dragging the net full of fishes’ (Jn 21:8). Immediately they bring their net and put it at our Lord’s feet, because the fish belong to him. We have to realize that souls belong to God. No one can think he has property rights over anyone’s soul. The apostolate of the Church, the preaching of the gospel, and the reality of salvation – all this is based, not on the prestige or merits of any person, but on the grace of God.

Jesus asks Peter if he loves him – again and again, as though offering him a triple chance to make up for having denied him three times. Peter has learned from the experience of his weakness. Now he knows that there is no need to put himself forward rashly, as he did before. And so he puts everything in Christ’s hands. ‘Lord, you know that I love you. . . Lord, you know all things, you know that I love you’ (Jn 21:15-17). And what does Christ answer? ‘Feed my lambs... feed my sheep’ (Jn 21:15-17). Not your sheep, mine! Because he is the creator of man, he is the redeemer, he is the one who has bought each individual soul, as mentioned before, with the price of his blood.

In the fifth century, the Donatists in the attacks against Catholics claimed that it was impossible for Augustine, the bishop of Hippo, to teach the truth, because he had been a great sinner. St Augustine suggested a possible answer to his brothers in the faith: “Augustine is a bishop of the catholic Church; he bears his burden, and he will have to give an account of it to God. I met him in the company of

those who were good. If he is a bad man, he will know it; but even if he is good, it is not in him that I have put my trust. Because the first thing that I learned in the catholic Church is not to put my hope in any man’.⁵

We do not carry out *our* apostolate. If that were the case, what could we say? We are carrying out Christ’s apostolate, since that is what God wants and that is what he commanded us to do: ‘Go into the whole world, and preach the gospel’ (Mk 16:15). The errors are ours; the fruits are the Lord’s.

Daring in the apostolate

How are we going to carry out this mission? First of all, with our example – by living according to the will of our Father, as Christ, with his life and his teaching, has taught us to do. True faith does not permit our actions to contradict what we say. We need to measure the authenticity of our faith by examining our behaviour. We are not sincere believers if we do not make the effort to put into practice what we profess with words.

This is a good moment to recall a particular event that shows clearly the wonderful apostolic zeal of the first Christians. It was some twenty years after our Lord’s ascension, and already people had heard about him in many villages and towns. A man named Apollo arrived in Ephesus. ‘He was an eloquent man and mighty in the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and being fervent in spirit, used to teach carefully whatever had to do with Jesus, though he knew of John’s baptism only’ (Acts 18:24-25).

The mind of this man had already begun to receive Christ’s light. He had heard about our Lord, and he wanted to pass the news to others. But he still had to learn more; he needed to acquire a fullness of faith and to come to love our Lord completely. A Christian couple, Aquila and Priscilla, hear his teachings. They are not inactive or indifferent. They do not think, ‘This man already knows enough; it’s not our business to teach him.’ Since they were souls who had a real concern for apostolate, ‘they took him home and expounded the way of God to him more precisely’ (Acts 18:26).

We cannot help admiring St Paul’s behaviour either. When he is in prison for having spread the doctrines of Christ, he misses no opportunity to keep on teaching the gospel. Brought before Festus and Agrippa, he does not hesitate. He speaks out: ‘But aided to this day by the help of God, I stand here to testify to both high and low, saying nothing beyond what the Prophets and Moses said would come to pass: that the Christ was to suffer, and that he first by his resurrection from the dead was to proclaim light to the people and to the Gentiles’ (Acts 26:22-23).

The Apostle does not keep quiet. He does not hide his faith or the apostolic activity that has brought on him the hatred of his persecutors. He goes on announcing the news of salvation to all nations. And, with a marvellous daring, he says to Agrippa: ‘Do you

believe the prophets, King Agrippa? I know that you do' (Acts 26:27). And when the king comments, 'In a short while you would persuade me to be a Christian,' Paul answers, 'I would to God that, whether it be long or short, not only you but all who hear me today might become as I am, except for these chains' (Acts 26:28-29).

Where did St Paul get all his strength? *Omnia possum in eo qui me confortat* (Phil 4:13): I can do all things, because God alone gives me this faith, this hope, this charity. I find it hard to believe in the effectiveness of an apostolate that is not centered on, and firmly rooted in, a continual relationship with our Lord. Yes, in the middle of one's work, right at home, or out in the street, in the midst of problems that come up every day, some more important than others. Right there, without abandoning those things, but with our hearts turned toward God. Then our words, our actions, even our defects, will give forth that *bonus odor Christi* (2 Cor 2:19): the sweet fragrance of the presence of Christ. Then others will be compelled to take notice and say: 'This man is a Christian.'

If you were to admit the temptation of asking yourself, 'What business is it of mine?', then I would have to answer you, 'It is your business, and he is telling you – asking you – to take care of it.' 'The harvest indeed is great, but the labourers are few. Pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send forth laborers into his harvest' (Mt 9:37-38). You may be tempted to look for the easy way; you may want to lull yourself, saying 'This is not for me; there are others who can do it; this sort of thing is beyond me.' But it is not beyond you, and there are no others. If you were to think that, everybody else would have a right to act the same way. Christ's request is addressed to each and every Christian. No one can

consider himself excused, because of his age, because of his health, or because of his occupation. There are no valid excuses of any kind. Either we carry out an apostolate that is fruitful, or else all our faith is useless.

Besides, who ever said that in order to talk about Christ and spread his doctrine, you have to do anything unusual or strange? Go about the business of your ordinary life; work at your job, trying to fulfill the duties of your state, doing and finishing your professional work well, growing, improving more and more every day. Be loyal; be understanding with others and demanding on yourself. Deny yourself. Be cheerful. This will be your apostolate. Then, even if, because of your own weaknesses, you cannot find any opportunities for apostolate, you will find that people come to you. You will talk with them naturally, simply – on your way home from work, in a family gathering, on a bus, walking down the street, anywhere. You will talk about things that everyone is concerned about in his soul, though some people may not want to realize it. They will understand better when they begin to look seriously for God.

Ask Mary, *Regina apostolorum*: Queen of apostles, to help you in your decision to share the desire that fills the heart of her Son – the desire to reach out to souls, to 'sow' and to 'fish'. I can assure you that, when you really get down to it you will see the boat filled with a marvellous catch of 'fish' just as the fishermen of Galilee saw it happen to them. And you will see Christ waiting for you on the shore, because the catch belongs to him.

REFERENCES

(1) *Homiliae in Evangelium*, 29, 4 (2) *Enarrationes in psalmos*, 21, 2, 26 (3) *Op. cit.*, 21, 2, 30 (4) St Augustine *In Iouannis Evangelium tractatus*, 122, 2 (5) *Enarrationes in psalmos*, 36, 3, 20.