

Pastoral and Ecclesial Aspects

SOME SPECIAL RECIPIENTS OF THE PASTORAL ACTION OF THE CHURCH: NON-BELIEVERS AND NON-CATHOLICS

Fr. Georg Sporschill SJ

Dear friends of the Society of St. Paul!

Father Stefano Stimamiglio has made a bridge between the mission of your Congregation and my life, which I spend among the street children and the Rom family of Romania. Even for the friendship that binds us, Stefano invited me to share with you some special experiences that I have gained in these years.

Today, I would like to ask three questions about the future of the Church, and through them I want to ask ourselves about the future of our communities, who have opted entirely for Jesus Christ on the model of St. Ignatius and St. Paul. This is to answer the final question: what works the world needs today from us?

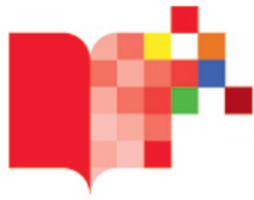
The Bible asks in a very concrete way:

- ✦ What need touches you?
- ✦ Where do you live?
- ✦ Who is the greatest?

I. What need touches you?

The source of inspiration

In Vienna, at the time of my priestly ordination in 1978, I had my pastoral ministry among the young. One day, a meeting at the station changed my life. A young man approached me asking for money: he had just been released from prison. At the kiosk, in front of a beer, he told me what his destiny would be. It was a homeless one. The next day I went to look for him, because at Caritas I had found a bed for him. But, having found it, he discovered that he needed money and work ... He did not let me go anymore and so we became friends. When I went to look for him on the street, I always met many more homeless people. Eventually I became a street worker and, at that point, with the absolute need to find a roof for my friends. In 1982, in Vienna, I founded the first home for a hundred homeless youths, the "Youth Caritas House". Soon we opened a house for homeless women and, during the winter, several other homes for homeless seniors. All this with the help of a socialist mayor. After seeing that the houses were not enough, we started to go by the road with small buses, also touching the railway stations. Night after night, to this day, we have brought to the homeless people the soup and the warm humanity, made of conversations, of friendship and sometimes of



prayers recited together. For many unemployed we have opened "INIGO", an inn where they operate by making hospitality a new job opportunity.

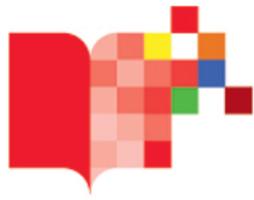
The needs have always pursued me. Tasks have become more and more numerous. I shouted for help. I needed mostly collaborators and collaborators. The young people in my old parish have listened to my appeal and have become my first volunteers. A community has emerged, which is very united in carrying out that intense volunteer activity. The quote from Talmud has always guided us: *«He who saves a life saves the whole world»*.

Later, after the fall of Ceausescu's regime in Romania (December 1989), the Jesuits sent me there to help street children. My Vienna friends and Caritas have continued to work with homeless people in the Austrian capital. When I first came to Bucharest, I was "received" at the station by a horde of street children by drug addicts and the violent ones. *«This is hell on earth»*, was my first thought. Immediately we went to live with this small "wild crowd" in a ruined house, which together we made it habitable, both externally and internally. It was the beginning of the work called Concordia, which worked for thousands of street children in Romania, Bulgaria and Moldova. It was the children who gave us the goals to reach and who unleashed unexpected forces in us.

«What need touches you?». Today in Transylvania the whole Rom families live with me. Sometimes, fathers and mothers go to Europe to collect money as beggars. At home in Romania, there are many children who are without money and have no access to education and minimum medical care. They often live in ten in a hut without electricity and no water. For them and with them I founded together, with Ruth Zenkert, the work called Elijah. We too, like the prophet Elijah, want to help them and bring fire out of the sky against all injustice. To people who have no rights in Europe, we want to give a home, a job, the ability to read and write. And all this with friendship. The most beautiful thing is our music school. The joy that the Rom families is emitting with music is just the starting point. And with it - you will be surprised! - even the community prayer!

I am amazed at everything that has happened in these years. Nothing planned where I was not the protagonist but where, on the contrary, everything was done by so many people and with many people. Everybody collaborates, no one gives or receives only. It is the exchange of gifts at the basis of the miracle we live. **The source of inspiration and energies was where I was touched by the need, where I myself have experienced the need.** Just as the Good Samaritan (see Lk 10:25-37), who was left to touch the poor man who had run into the brigands, and from that very moment he was able to develop a small care program for him. Instead, the glutton rich was not himself touched in the story told by Jesus (see Lk 16:19-3). Outside his door was the poor Lazarus, whose wounds were licked by the dogs. But the wealthy man, hidden behind the walls of his home, could not see it. Too late, he will realize that by acting differently, he could save his life and that of his brothers and sisters.

With regard to the future of your Congregation, I invite you to a brief reflection. For two seconds forget your past, the tasks you have done so far, the buildings that you have and the powerful structures you manage. And ask yourself very simply: what need touches me personally today? Who of my brothers finds himself today in a situation of need? What is his request today? Only then can you answer with Jesus to the question posted by the Doctor of the Law in the parable of the Good Samaritan: who is my neighbour?



2. Where do you live?

The question of the young

I meet a young talented priest, full of love and enthusiasm. He works in an extreme situation in a Catholic community in Turkey. He has a good judgment on the country's political situation and on the situation of the Church. His confidence with the young strikes me. Many embrace him, and he reciprocates, embracing them in turn. He lives in the big parish convent with the parish priest. They pray together, eat together, guard the house and the church. Only the two of them. In the morning a woman comes to clean and cook for them. At the time of the Mass, the church is open, thereafter there is a meeting in the courtyard, which ends one hour later. Then the two are alone again. They do their job, look faraway and communicate with their friends around the world.

The question that the Gospel addresses to successful people is: who is your disciple, (inclusive of man and woman)? Who do you share your life with? This is precisely the first question the two young men ask Jesus to approach Him: «Master, where do you live? » (Jn 1:38). The Greek word *menein*, a key word in John, means exactly "to live", and includes all the actions from the time you get up until bedtime, from work time to free time, from prayer to mealtime. Jesus was the cause for the young to ask him. And it was He who took the initiative after seeing the two young men and asked them, «What are you looking for»? In fact, after receiving their curious response («Where do you live? »), Jesus invites them: «Come and see» (Jn 1:38 ff).

Athanasius of Alexandria was once asked how he could make a young man a Christian. It is said that he replied: «I make him live with me for a year».

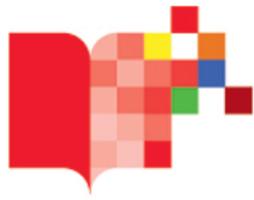
Our Founders imitated this special communicative force that existed between Jesus and the young. They recognized the needs of the time and understood what the young men sought for. They invited them to live with them, to pray with them, and to share their own apostolate. The lifestyle of our Founders was such that the young people found the need and the desire to cooperate with them. Their doors were always open.

The Yeshivah's biblical lifestyle, which Jesus received from his fathers and which he has in turn transmitted to his disciples, is exactly the model of the future Church and, in particular, of the religious Orders. Then the real question is: where concretely can young people really stay with us? Who among them can give us his help? Who is our guest? Who is sitting with us at table? Who celebrates Mass with us? Who prays with us?

Returning to the splendid young priest earlier, the question is: who are your disciples? Call them by name, just as Jesus did when he called the Twelve or Mary Magdalene by name.

Let us now look at ourselves and our brothers and sisters: who of us has young friends who are interested in the lives of our communities, our vocation, our own lives? Who of us lives with the young? Still: where do guests go? And even more concretely: through whom and by what work of our Congregation or Order did a young man feel attracted and, therefore, entered? And to you personally, who you are listening to me: who are you inviting? Who is your disciple? Where can he accompany you?

3. Who is the greatest?



To have a feel for the mission

I was fortunate enough to enjoy the friendship of Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini. As a confrere of my Order, we already knew each other by fame. I met him for the first time in the early eighties in Vienna when he held a conference to the prison chaplains. Cardinal Martini, on that occasion, encouraged us. His key word was: «Courage!» «Courage» was also his good-bye to us, when we last saw at Gallarate, and also his final recommendation to all those who have a responsibility in the Church.

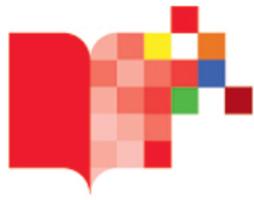
Once I asked the old Cardinal how, during his long ministry in Milan, he had been able to fill the Cathedral of Milan with crowds of young people. His response was modest: «I do not know, I just wanted to hear them». Before every catechesis, in fact, he invited a group of young people at home to listen to their questions. He did not preach to them, but from them he simply valued their treasures, just as a midwife helps a child to be born. The child is not her work, she only helps him to be born healthy, so that once he comes to the world, he can raise his voice to heaven.

Unforgettable, then, was the idea of Cardinal Martini to form the “Chair of the Unbelievers”. At first many thought that he wanted to catechize the unbelievers. Instead, he meant the “chair” exactly in the opposite sense: they are the believers who must learn from the unbelievers, listening to their difficulties, their questions and thus discovering their true treasures. Exactly as it is deduced from the title of the famous booklet written by Martini together with Umberto Eco: *In what does one believe who does not believe?* For Martini, people, especially young people and non-believers, were not “objects” of his mission, but rather the “subjects” of it, the partners of a conversation. He did not speak “about” them, but he spoke “with” them. With great expectations Martini met all that was strange to him. He listened and learned. His interlocutors felt respect for him, and discovered their own great dignity by meeting him. The question remained open about who was the greatest.

Just as in the baptism of Jesus at the Jordan, when He and John talked about who was the greatest among them. In the end Jesus is baptized by John. Jesus, the Messiah, submits to the Precursor and learns from him. And, in doing so, he heard a voice from above: you are the beloved and you have a great job to do (cfr. Mt 3:13-17).

Make the other great, here is the secret of the pastoral ministry. This also applies to street children. After many years I was in Romania, I met in Bucharest a kid I had taken away from the street and that in the meantime he had become an adult. «Do not forget that I was your teacher», he said proudly. Worthy of his memory, it was not the fact that I had helped him, but rather that he had helped me. From this kid, many years back, I had learned my first Romanian-speaking words, and then one day I said, «You are my teacher!» Having learned from him was more important to him than what I had donated to him.

This thesis is also the provocation that Pope Francis wanted to give us on the occasion of the Synod on the family. He wanted to hear, from his preparation, what people of all parts of the world thought about the family, the young, about sexuality. That is, in other words, what their questions were and their concerns. This was more important than the same answers they gave. The Holy Father appreciated the confrontation of opinions, sometimes even clashing within the Synod, in the



2° SEMINARIO INTERNAZIONALE EDITORI PAOLINI

ARICCIA=16-21 OTTOBRE 2017

hope that the particular Churches and, ultimately, every adult Christian may learn to take the next step to continue on the road of “love”. Francis with this method told us all, especially those who live in a difficult family situation or who have had accidents in their affective life: «You are no longer children, but adults, you are the bearers of the Holy Spirit and you have to practice to discern the spirits. Courage!».

Let us ask ourselves now: to whom are we sent? For whom do we want to work?

At the same time, to transform our way of thinking in view of the good of our communities and the faithful, it is important to ask ourselves: from whom do we learn?

As for Cardinal Martini his teachers were the non-believers, so I can say that my teachers were the street children and the Rom families.

And for you, who are the teachers who will lead you in the future?

Finally, an invitation. That which in the past was full of value has now become a burden. At this time, Jesus invites us to throw the net again on the other side (see Jn 21: 6). That which appeared to be an impossible time, today is happening. If we open our windows, as what Pope John XXIII did, if we give importance to men and women as what Pope Francis is doing, if we ourselves come out and open our eyes and ears to the needs of the people, then they will come to us like greater tasks than what we have thought by staying inside, and perhaps completely different from those that have been in the past. We will then see that men will do everything to get into our networks!

I invite each of you personally to ELIJAH to do an experiment.

Thank you.