

The Gift of the ST Priesthood to the Missionary Cenacle Family

The ST priest and Missionary Cenacle Spirituality

Both the times and our own growth as a Missionary Cenacle Family ask us to consider our spirituality. Father Judge would be appalled at the number of people who leak away from the Church and organized religion, as well as the scores of baptized Catholics who have become indifferent to their faith. If he were still here, he would be mobilizing people to respond. A well trained, spiritualized laity was his thought and response; a laity accompanied and spiritually ministered to by his Sisters and Brothers and Priests.

This thought is foremost in Father's mind when in 1925, he writes a letter to one of his followers [unknown, just addressed as 'My dear Child,' MF00926]:

"The value to the Church of a trained spiritualized laity will be incalculable. So many lay organizations have a noticeable element of the social or they give themselves so unremittingly to charitable activities that they may unfit themselves for a larger and more lasting good. The thought and anxiety then is how to keep the good souls mentioned up to their spiritual ideals. I do not think it can be done if nothing is kept before them except encouragement to undertake works or programs or methods. As things are falling in place around us this seems to be very much the mode. **To save the Outer Cenacle then from such disadvantages and perils to their spiritual life is one reason why the Brothers have been instituted**" [emphasis mine].

The 1928 Constitution that Father wrote for the Brothers' group mentions little, if anything, of this spiritual mentoring role. The main thrust of that Constitution was our missionary goals, and the spiritual customs and practices to sustain the Brothers and Priests in their missionary commitment. To speak of our spirituality and its transmission was never directly addressed and can only be hypothetically re-created from our archival documents and our remembered history.

How the ST Priest Lives and Transmits Missionary Cenacle Spirituality

Father Judge put his hope and trust in his followers to carry out his vision and perpetuate his spirituality. He regarded both the Cenacle and the Missionary Servants as something new in the Church to respond to the pressing needs of the time.

Our first priests impressed upon me that Father wanted them to be “saints,” persons alive with the apostolic spirit, charity at white heat, and not mere functionaries. Father envisioned his future priests as capable of being sent to wherever there was a dire need, wherever the faith was in danger of being lost, wherever others were reluctant or fearful to go. He wanted us to be men “of the Church,” not just to think with the Church, but to feel with the Church, *Sentire cum Ecclesia*.

Father Judge oscillates between doing it himself and channeling others to do the missionary task. This is a healthy tension that must be maintained in our ministry.

Father’s advice to a newly ordained priest is a cherished part of Cenacle lore. He counsels him to “be zealous, preach the Gospel, console the desolate, offer the Bread of Life to God’s faithful. The priest should be known to the homes of the sick, stricken, poor and lowly. He should have a compassionate heart for sinners.” He writes that the first law of the priest “is the salvation of souls.” In sum, the priest was to imitate the Good Shepherd, meek and humble of heart.

What he wrote was obviously a reflection of Father’s pastoral style as he recovered his health in his first parish in Emmitsburg, Maryland. He would later try the same visiting techniques when he was assigned to Saint John’s in Brooklyn, New York. In the city, most ignored him and would not open the door for him. Some of his few entries into homes were achieved through the back door of the house, a place where only the familiar called. He gained many a surprised visit this way. As time passed people seeing him in his suit and collar would not even open the back door for him! His frustrating attempt at pastoral visits led him to form the Cenacle.

Father Judge was formed in the vision of priesthood of his time. Vatican II, in renewing the Church, laid out many new perspectives on ministry and priesthood. The numerous ecclesial documents that have guided us in our reflections since the Council define the key role of the priest in this manner. The ordained priest is to:

1. *Proclaim the Word of God and evangelize*
2. *Shepherd and guide an evangelized community of believers*
3. *Encourage and allow members to use their gifts for the faith community and the wider community to make a better world*
4. *Give his life to modeling the teachings of Jesus for others*

5. Lead the community in worship and sacrament as fitting expression of our life together.

In a spirit of renewal, ST priests have been successful in taking on these new roles.

(1) To proclaim the Word of God and to evangelize:

As a Missionary Servant priest I have always admired the sensitivity and simplicity of our priests. They work hard to make the Word of God and the faith readily understandable. They explain it with a vivacity and naturalness, steeped in concrete examples, engaging, challenging, but never talking down to people. They have a transparent naturalness and gift to meet people where they are at. Much is the result of their assiduous preparation for every sacramental event.

As missionaries, their eye is trained to look for who is not coming, who is 'leaking' away, who does not know about God's love and the offer of salvation in Jesus. They will seek ways to find and to engage these people and to prepare and mobilize others in this task of evangelization.

They meet others and evangelize in common settings, a kind of "kitchen table" group, confident to sit around the kitchen table and chat. In these conversations they not only offer counsel on problems, but bring people to see God acting in the providence of their every day lives.

(2) To shepherd and guide an evangelized community of believers:

Our priests have been excellent in forging community among the poor, the disparate, the mistrustful. They start in difficult areas where little has been organized. They blend equally well into the inner city as the rural landscape. They are skilled in bringing people together, creating ministries and services, and in moving people along. The practical consequences of knowing ourselves loved by God engage us to create a better world and appreciate God's blessings. They teach them a wider horizon of Church and lead them toward projects of social justice and human promotion as part of the Gospel imperative. They have had considerable success with people who struggle: for civil rights, fair wages, worker protection, the discriminated, the immigrant, the forgotten. Clearly, they tell them that God loves them and lead them to Christ. They see in their sufferings the naked, abandoned Christ of Calvary.

(3) To encourage and allow members the faith community and the wider community to use their gifts to make a better world:

Missionary Servants speak about shared or collaborative ministry. It is not without tension as roles, functions, and relationships are evaluated and defined. All are encouraged to develop and share their gifts for the good of the community and the world.

Praying together helps us to forge and strengthen a vision. A climate of spiritual discernment helps to surface and promote gifts. A Missionary Servant priest will be focused on who is not coming, who is not being reached. He will take time to promote the missionary gifts of others, making them apostles.

(4) To give his life to modeling the teaching of Jesus for others:

Father Judge's words echo here – no one can be apostolic without being spiritual. To model Christ is a continual challenge, especially as Missionary Servants may tend to be more activist than reflective.

Since the Second Vatican Council, priesthood is widely understood in role and relationship to others. Terms like “servant leader” and the models that grow from this, enable us examine our lives in service to others. While this is laudable, there is a danger of failing to give due emphasis to the key link of our relationship to the Lord. The priest is to be *Alter Christus*.

Father Judge spoke much of centering our life on Jesus. Early in the morning he took his hour with the Lord. Any serious problem was brought to the chapel at any time of day or night, to seek God's lights. Father Judge was far ahead of his time in his use, knowledge and reflections upon the Scriptures. He asked the same of his followers in the Repetition of Prayer. “Be close to the Word, imitate the Word, let the Word shape your heart!” Number 14 of the Rule of Life would further us in growing as disciples of Jesus and seeing priestly ministry as the service that grows out of that discipleship commitment.

(5) To lead the community in worship and sacrament as fitting expression of our life together:

Missionary Servant priests are reliable celebrants. They celebrate with a naturalness, engendering a warmth and closeness in the congregation. They create a sense of “family” among the participants. They are simple, direct and unpretentious. They know sacraments to be life giving moments and continue to celebrate with their people. They prepare their message well and deliver it in a straightforward, direct style. They speak about Jesus and his teachings in a familiar way. I hope that our celebratory style radiates to our people that the Eucharist is indeed the sum, sun and center of our lives.

Three Challenges for the ST Priest

If there is a particular Missionary Cenacle priestly dimension that needs to be recovered, it is the gift and usage of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. A visit to the Perboyre Chapel in Brooklyn immediately reveals the dynamics of the Cenacle. Father Judge chose a small concentrated space where he could intensely work the congregants. What remained strongest in my mind: the original chapel had two confessionals in the back!!

Reconciliation has suffered in the climate of individualism, hedonism and narcissism that has lost a sense of sin. Rarely do we hear much of sin and the need for reconciliation these days. There is abundant Cenacle lore of Father Judge as a confessor, the long, intense sessions with penitents, asking them always how much they loved God and what were they willing to do to respond to God's great love. Father followed up on the promptings of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

It is here that our tradition of confession-spiritual direction is really anchored. It is an area that requires time, preparation and intensity. In an activist culture, penance and reconciliation can easily be relegated to second or third place.

This is a challenge to Missionary Servant priests in the present age: to be credible reconcilers and celebrators. Our frequent recourse to the Sacrament of Reconciliation for our own weakness and struggles strengthens us to be better celebrants. It shows us the deep patterns of sin and the false self in our lives and opens us to the promptings of the Spirit. It sensitizes us in our sacramental ministry to be aware of the same dynamics in others.

A second challenge to our times is the need to be more aware of our own precious Cenacle spirituality and to have a greater willingness to share it with others. All of us need to support and encourage a reflective process as how to deepen and transmit our heritage.

The need for spiritual companions is apparent and Father's words resonate in our minds. Any apostolic group that is not spiritually anchored will tend to one or the other extreme. It will be an activist group or a social group. Only a well grounded spiritual life cultivates apostolic zeal. Father insisted upon "repetition of prayer." This is being recovered in "faith sharing" and it is encouraging to see it happening in mixed groups representing all the branches.

The final current challenge for Missionary Servant priesthood is to see the gift of priesthood within the whole Church, in the context of bishops, fellow priests, deacons and laity. It is especially challenging to refine our role to so many new, evolving lay ministries, conscious of the words of Lumen Gentium #10, "...that the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial priesthood, although ordered to one another in the one priesthood of Christ, differ from one another in essence and not only in degree."

We experience the role of the ordained priest in a more communal, relational context. The full meaning of ordained priesthood as well as the full meaning of the priesthood of the baptized will only be deepened by contemplating them together. This means for Missionary Servant priests a greater involvement in the local Church and a real interpenetration with the laity in the mission of the Reign of God.

Reflection Questions:

- 1. What makes our Family liturgical celebrations different?*
- 2. What is my current practice of the Sacrament of Reconciliation?*
- 3. Name three concrete things I do to share and spread Father Judge's spirituality.*

Conclusion

In closing, I would like to acknowledge a debt of gratitude to persons who were my influential formers as a Missionary Servant priest: our Missionary Brothers. These servants of God schooled me in the practical applications of the spiritual, religious and apostolic life. Brother Joseph Limpert gave me the spirit of Father Judge and showed me what the practice was of "living in the presence of God." Brothers Peter Claver and Basil conveyed to me their love of our charism in their care for the poor and abandoned, young people and children. Brother Paschal was a well known figure in the black "quarters" long before civil rights was popular. Brother Cyprian taught me how to visit the poor and never make them feel uncomfortable. Brothers Robert and Aaron were my models for what service and the true love of Christ is all about. They, and other Brothers made me and my generation into the Missionary Servant priests that we are today with a love of God, a heart of service and a deep love for the poor and abandoned. Their contribution made us different from others and special. I hope that it will not be forgotten!

When I first came to the Cenacle, the guiding principle was “the Cenacle spirit was ‘caught’ more than ‘taught’.” Cenacle members transmitted the spirit by a type of ‘osmosis.’ The quest for spiritual renewal, the passing of the generation that knew and accompanied Father Judge, changing times, different cultures and differing catechetical backgrounds of our members have made it necessary to codify and make our spirituality more explicit. The Meditation Book, the Rule of Life and the Missionary Cenacle Spiritual Exercises have been welcome steps in this process. These resources furnish a Missionary Servant priest ready tools to make Father Judge’s thought and vision present in our preaching of the Word and celebration of the sacraments.

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