

Emphasising the Process While Making Decisions

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We, priests and religious, always feel at the depth of our being that our call has a divine origin which constantly invites us to serve God's people by fixing our gaze on Him who has called us. As we fix our eyes on him, we need to listen to him. What does he want us to do here and now? What does his people want from us? God who has taken initiative in calling us wants us to continue his mission with the marginalized and the oppressed. If we want to carry forward God's mission here on earth, we need to appropriate the injunction of Pope Francis that we need a Church that goes to the peripheries [EG 20]. This should be a wake-up call for us who have often got stuck in the world of complacency and mediocrity in our ministries. Therefore, we have to sincerely pause and examine about our commitment to the peripheries? Are we marching towards the peripheries or are we still busy in establishing our kingdoms in the center?

Today when we ask people about our works, often they speak in glorious terms about our institutions like universities, colleges, hospitals, social action centers, retreat centers, formation houses etc. There is a feeling that through our institutions we have *occupied enormous spaces* at times even at the cost of the poor who may not have even a piece of land to

build a decent house. It appears easier for us to occupy spaces anywhere in the name of mission due to our institutions, due to our contacts with the influential people who could come to our rescue to overcome any obstacles. Once a lay person bitterly commented saying that the mission of the religious is to buy lands (*occupying spaces*), to put up structures, to start institutions in the name of mission and then to make money. It may be an exaggerated comment. But there is a ray of truth that is bitter for us to accept. Behind this word 'mission' at times what we look for is monetary gain. In other words, these establishments become merely profit making enterprises by compromising with our options and priorities. Unfortunately, they become anti-kingdom witness. As St. Mother Teresa of Calcutta used to say "We are called to do God's work. But often we end up in doing our own work".

Church is not an NGO. "For the Church, the option for the poor is primarily a theological category rather than a cultural, sociological, political or philosophical one" (EG 198). Our dioceses and religious congregations are not working for profit. We are ambassadors of Christ. We are men and women sent by God to carry forward his mission. Therefore, it is good to ask what criteria we employ while occupying spaces, while starting our mission? Often the decisions are made in haste without going through a proper process of discernment, without prayer and reflection. When there is no proper process, it means we have failed to discern what God and his people want us to do. The question is are we focusing only on the *end product of occupying spaces* but also on *the process (Discernment)*?

Before beginning any mission or institution, what is required of us today is to create a space within for God and for others. Creating space means listening to God and to our target groups. While we listen, we can pose following questions to ourselves:

Who am I? Who are we? As individuals and as a group we have to become constantly aware of our identity: Each individual is a child of God and as a group, we are children of

God. This question addresses our identity. We are neither social workers nor teachers nor volunteers but primarily we are children of God and we are related to God. Therefore, we need to listen to him.

Why are we here? This question touches upon the purpose of our existence. The “WHY” of our life. We are here on earth to love and serve God and his people. As children of God, our purpose is to glorify God through our service to people. We do not live for our glory, for our success, for name and fame.

What do people want? Since we want to serve the people, we need to listen to people whom we want to serve. What are their needs? What do they expect from us? There may be some who will be opposing our entry, we need to pay attention to them as well and discern such voices of dissent. It is also important to whom we are listening: the people who are in the center, i.e. the powerful and the privileged or those who are in the periphery.

Through what apostolate do we want to serve? After listening to the people and to their needs, we have to present the collected data and information to the superiors of communities or council members of our congregation or Diocese. We need to reflect together upon what apostolate would address their needs and concerns. The needs of the locality should be the focus. Our congregation or diocese may be known for education or primary health care or social work but that may not be the need of the locality. The apostolate that we choose is a means to serve people. If we start a particular apostolate, we need to note down the advantages and disadvantages of that ministry. We have to also study about the major beneficiaries of our service: the rich or the poor. Each one prepares the pros and cons of the apostolate.

Then we share the advantages and disadvantages with other members. After weighing the advantages and disadvantages individually, let each member make a tentative decision. It need not be shared with others. It could be for one member

educational apostolate, for another social work and the third member may feel that we need not begin any ministry in the locality.

What is your inner disposition? Am I inwardly free? Am I stuck with the ministry that I like? Are there any prejudices about the place, work, people etc.? Here we need interior freedom. What God wants is primary and not what I want.

What does the Lord say? Now we, each one individually, bring our tentative decision before the Lord. We pray over our choice. Let us listen to God and see what he says. Let us check our interior movements like consolation, desolation, peace, disturbance, confusion and explore these feelings because the Lord speaks to us through the interior movements. The members can share with others along with the tentative decision, the feelings that they have gone through. This is done in an atmosphere of prayer. After listening to others, let each one see what goes on within oneself? Do I want to change my tentative decision? Am I comfortable and peaceful with it? We need to look for the confirmation from the Lord. After listening to others and to your interior movements share your feelings and tentative decision with others.

Then as a group, either we can vote, or the Major superior or the Bishop after listening to all, can take the decision about the apostolate. The decision need not be taken immediately.

When we go through a process of discernment, we listen to people, we listen to our companions and we allow the Lord to speak to us. In other words, we create a space for God and for others before occupying external spaces. Here the primary focus is on what God desires of us. We see what people need than what we need. It also helps us to find out whether the ministry we start takes us to the periphery, whether it will be a counter-cultural witness. Therefore, today there is a greater need to go through a process of discernment as a group while making major decisions about our mission.