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Paul in the thick of his ministry.

(6) The pastor's life

Often I have been asked to comment on (1) how the Bishop lives the evangelical counsels and the life of prayer: reflections on the pastor's fragmented life today; (2) the Bishop's reflections and suggestions on what he has witnessed and is seeing over the years in the lives of his priests; (3) the priest and his varied relationships in the ministry: with other priests, laymen and women - richness, possibilities, problems. These are no light matters and I'd like to start with the first and then go on to suggest a few thoughts on the second and third subjects.

THE BISHOP AND THE LIFE OF PRAYER

As I cannot examine all the evangelical counsels, I begin with the life of prayer. The first reflection is that my prayer, our prayer, always goes beyond us, and we do not succeed in cataloguing our experiences very well or in defining the point we are at. So I find it very difficult to talk about prayer. I realize that as I am inside it I am not able to give an adequate description of it.

Our fragmented lives

So this attempt to talk about our own prayer is going to be provisional, hesitant and uncertain. Given this, I freely accept the fact that the pastor's life today is fragmented. For example, coming to you for a moment of recollection, I feel the distance between what I was doing before and this, Le., the need to get into the right spirit. Such fragmentation is typical of every pastor. He is involved in responsibilities he cannot completely control, in programmes that do not depend on him, he often feels pulled this way and that.

I am impressed every time I read the biography of St Gregory the Great: "When I lived in a monastic community I was able to keep my tongue from idle topics and to devote my mind almost continually to the discipline of prayer." (Gregory had reached a very high state of prayer in the monastery, whereas I cannot say this of myself and perhaps neither can you of yourselves when you think of your life in the seminary. His prayer had everything going for it.) Then he goes on: "Since taking on my shoulders the burden of pastoral care, I have been unable to keep steadily recollected because my mind is distracted by many responsibilities."

Then he explains what being fragmented means in his life: "I am forced to consider questions affecting Churches and monasteries and often I must judge the lives and actions of individuals; at one moment I am forced to take part in certain civil affairs, next I must worry over the incursions of barbarians and fear the wolves who menace the flock entrusted to my care."

We too have our barbarians and our wolves, we have the complexity of social problems, socio-political problems, all of which tear us apart and harass us with new and unforeseen cares. "Now I must accept political responsibility in order to give support to those who preserve the rule of law; now I must bear patiently the villainies of brigands" (he has to "swallow" certain particularly difficult situations) "and then I must confront them, yet in all charity. My mind is sundered and torn to pieces by the many and serious things I have to think about" (this is no little thing for Gregory the Great to say, who was really a mystic). "When I try to concentrate and gather all my intellectual resources for preaching, how can I do justice to the sacred ministry of the word? I am often compelled by the nature of my position to associate with men of the world and sometimes I relax the discipline of my speech. If I preserved the rigorously inflexible mode of utterance that my conscience dictates, I know that the weaker sort of men would recoil from me and that I could never attract them to the goal I desire for them. So I must frequently listen patiently to their aimless chatter. Because I am weak myself I am drawn gradually into idle talk and I find myself saying the kind of thing that I didn't even care to listen to before." (From *Homilies on Ezekiel*, cf. the Breviary reading for the feast of St Gregory the Great on 3rd September).

God leads us

So what can we do if reality is like this?

I think there is *a passive* and an *active* side to the matter. I find it extremely difficult to speak of either adequately, so I will just mention them.

By *passive* I mean that despite everything God leads us; the Holy Spirit comes to meet our weakness. As the years pass in our ministry the number of our problems and relationships grow and yet, we don't know how, we find it is getting easier to unite our mind and spirit, through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Probably it is a grace of our vocation: God in his love enables us to cope with the complexity of problems arising out of the ministry and gives us sufficient grace to maintain a minimum of unity and consistency. So I think that the solution is first of all *passive*: to entrust ourselves consciously and sometimes even with our eyes shut to the grace of our state, which our Lord will not fail to give us. In spite of all impressions to the contrary the Spirit guides us towards unity. So I am trusting and optimistic, not necessarily for immediate results but on the whole I believe the Lord will not let us go without the bread of prayer, unity of spirit, even though it is not easy to see how this can come about. "The Spirit comes to the aid of our weakness interceding for us with unutterable groans" (Rom 8:26). I asked Father Dupont the meaning of this saying of Paul's, knowing that he is an expert, and he replied that he would think about it. After a while he wrote to me with some very fine reflections, and yet I still think that this phrase is part of God's mystery and invites us to delve deep.

At the rock face

The *active* aspect can be described through an image that is particularly dear to me. It is the image of someone clambering a steep cliff or a mountain rock face. It illustrates both the difficulty involved in getting to the top and the possibility of achieving it, in our case the possibility of maintaining a certain unity in our prayer and in our fragmented lives. If you look at a mountain peak from a distance you get the impression that you cannot make it. No, it is too sheer, I will never be able to climb it.

If we consider the complexities of our ministry from a distance, so many things to do, so many cares, the unforeseen demands which continually upset our programme, however flexible, we think we will never make it.

But if you go up to the rock face, you will find that there is a support here, another there and with a little courage you can begin to climb it. It cannot be done just by letting yourself go, like going along a path. The climb requires attention at every step. This is the way it is in our life of prayer in the fragmentation of our lives. It requires attention at every step. No step forward can be taken unless you want to take it, pay attention and plan it.

Honestly a life of prayer in a fragmented pastoral life is not possible without continual vigilance: "Watch and pray that you do not fall into temptation."

A third element in the image of the mountaineer on the rock face allows us to offer more practical suggestions. When you are at the face, it is important to have at least three out of four safe supports, because with one you take the step (either by hand or foot) and with the others you cling on. If you have three safe supports and one fails, at least you still have two. But if only two of the supports are safe, you cannot risk taking a step.

So you need three safe supports and a fourth that can be variable.

The supports

Applying the metaphor of the rock face we can say that there is a very *important first support: the prayer rhythms imposed by the ministry*. This support saves us. For me, for example, having to celebrate pontifical services or Mass with the people, praying the Divine Office alone or in a group, is a very great help.

It is a support which does a lot for us, giving great unity to the life of prayer, and we receive it gratefully even if on its own it is not sufficient. In fact we can fulfill these functions in the spirit of an

official. While we are celebrating Mass we look round to see how the choir is doing, how the congregation leaders are getting on, and in the end often it is just an external celebration for us. So we need to pay close attention to make good use of this grace. We must try to make sure the prayers imposed by our ministry make sense to us, and we pray them with a sense of peace. Priests who are not engaged in the Parish ministry (university teachers or those working in other fields) are aware of the lack of "public" prayers. So I repeat that the rhythms of prayer imposed by the ministry are a grace of God for anyone who has a thousand little jobs to deal with and might not otherwise be able to make this space for prayer.

A second support is a concerted line in spiritual reading. It is important to have a good selection of reading matter, which helps us and to which we can return every now and then. I don't say we have to manage to do much spiritual reading every day, but it is a mistake to miss it out altogether. It puts us in touch with spiritual writers from the past or present. They may be a useful relief to our dryness, troubles or tiredness. They recharge us. I realize that over time I have gathered a sort of little library, not very big, because I also like to read new things, but new things sometimes do not give us spiritual nourishment and are to be read at other times. In my little library I have books that can set me up again, and help me in my prayer. I can resort to them easily, perhaps just for a quick read (ten minutes, half an hour). They restore me to a spiritual wealth that the daily grind had dispersed, leaving me dry and perhaps with clenched teeth.

A third support is found in the practice of a regular and continuous meditation on the Lectionary of the Mass. Till today I have always followed this and I find it very useful. It may be that in a few years time I will take up another liturgical trail. Nevertheless, the daily readings from the Lectionary for ordinary days and feast days which propose a continuous *lectio*, followed by the feast day gospels is certainly a guiding trail we should not neglect. It is important that every evening we look up the readings for the next day and spend some time reflecting on the texts. Next morning, as soon as possible, we should take up the passages again and during the day we should possibly return to it and pray with it.

In this way, even if the time we spend is not long, there is an unbroken rhythm which runs through our prayer and gives it unity. Even brief moments snatched during the day will give this coherence to our daily meditation. I also think it is salutary to look forward. At the beginning of the week, for example, we can have a quick look at the *lectio continua* of the daily gospels; at the beginning of a liturgical season, like Lent, we can have a look at the *lectio continua* of the Season's readings. Then it becomes easier to find a moment for spiritual reading to provide a framework for the whole and every day we can take up the individual passages for that day.

This is not work which requires a lot of time. It can also be done on days when because of some difficulty the timetable is all upset, but this is never to the extent that we cannot do the spiritual reading.

A fourth support is the variable one I mentioned when I spoke of the mountain rock face. It is provided by retreat days and the annual Spiritual Exercises. On their own they are not sufficient, because they may recharge us and then we lose it all again. But without this support the others in the end may lose their power.

This is the support that enables us to keep going on the road with the other three. Personally I find great spiritual nourishment from retreats or Spiritual Exercises.

I have dealt with these simple points and I think that your own experience may be broader than mine. In my life which is so fragmented, the supports I have listed are the visible active ones and cannot be neglected. Because times may come when things accumulate or our health gives way, and we are forced to abandon the active prayer life and surrender to the passive side. Without this passive side the active remains vague and inconsistent.

LOOKING AT THE PRIEST'S LIFE

A few quick points on the other subjects. I am afraid when I have to give judgments on others but I cannot reflect on what I have seen during these year's happening in priests' lives without forming a certain judgment.

So I decided to put questions to myself as if in an interview:

- Are there any spiritual sicknesses I have noted here and there in priests' lives?
- What things strike me most on the positive side?

These questions could be answered at length because of course there are spiritual and pastoral sicknesses. Jesus came as a physician to heal the sick and if we say we do not need healing we are deceiving ourselves. We are sick, so there are diseases.

Possible sicknesses

Among these sicknesses there can be very grave ones but which occur in particular situations and therefore cannot be described. Each of us may fall ill, some time seriously ill.

I would rather consider typical serious sicknesses, not necessarily mortal, and not extremely rare. I mention two in particular:

- a type of psychological sickness;
- a type of sickness that affects pastoral work.

The first sickness is serious and cause for suffering and concern when it arises. It is when the will seems to be failing. It is difficult to describe clearly. It is a sickness of the spirit and the psyche. Our relish and will to struggle begin to fail. We feel flat and do our work feeling like robots. This sickness is cause for concern, because if it is not treated it reaches a point of such loss of perspective that we feel we have reached a dead end. Unless something extraordinary happens, I will have to go with clenched teeth, bearing life's psychological burden, a weight that my shoulder cannot carry.

In this case prayer becomes something we just have to do to carry out the duties of our ministry.

This is not a frequent sickness, thank God, but it can occur in two forms.

The first, the less serious one, is when we can look at it openly, consider it objectively, without being excessively disturbed by it, put up with it but distance ourselves from it a little. We regard it as curable and seek the reasons for this trial with our spiritual director.

The second form is rather more grave. It is when we have let the sickness get hold of us and fundamentally do not believe it is curable. We say: this is my lot and unless some great event occurs to change my life, I will go on like this... The state of this priest is truly painful both for himself and people who become aware of his state. Sometimes there is an attempt to help the priest by giving him a new place, job, offering more stimulus, but help is extremely difficult. Maybe the change will be useful because it is basically a psychological sickness, an exhaustion of inner vitality, which can be restored in new situations. But when the sickness is deep rooted, the sick man loses confidence in everything and does not let himself be helped. Even though he leads a good life and does good (because it cannot be denied that he still offers himself to the people as much, fulfills his ministerial duties etc.) he causes suffering because no one can understand how to cure him.

The second type of sickness affects pastoral work. This happens when pastoral or Church work no longer seems an open field but becomes a trap and closes in on us. We become emotionally involved with feelings that are mostly negative (of irritation, discontent, animosity, negative judgments about people) in pastoral work which is good in itself. We have these feelings against people who don't turn up, don't do anything, don't follow, about the constantly falling number of worshippers etc. When, instead of being an open field in which we work in faith, all this becomes a heavy load, we get ill.

Now we think of the Church as if it were a political or commercial enterprise, at most wrenching it back at the end with a flap of our spiritual wings, saying: Everything is going wrong but God will provide. But our spirit is exasperated, our words lack conviction, we expect fantastic new pastoral methods and so on.

This is not a serious illness but the consequences are painful because they confine the spirit, the heart, the judgment. It is a case of serious lack of theological hope, a lack of biblical reflection on the destiny of the people of God.

Often our current judgments, even when we make them lightly, follow this slothful course. They do not help us to enlarge the horizon, we have not weighed our words when we make them.

So these are just some points to help you reflect about yourselves, about what you see and try to assess as you gradually make progress in the knowledge of yourself and others.

Positive signs

I will note briefly the *positive* things I have noticed in priests' lives during these years. Again I will use examples.

Sometimes returning from a pastoral visit, I say to myself or to the Episcopal vicar that some young priests are getting along very well, almost better than expected, given their character, temperament and talents. This quite often happens and we ask ourselves: How is it that those from whom the general opinion is not to expect much are often the best pastoral workers?

I think the answer is that these are often people who entered the ministry with a deep humility, a readiness to serve, persistence. They did not overrate their own talents or claim successes. They honestly put themselves at the people's service. The people value them more and more and they continually develop.

It is one of the most interesting things to see priests who open up in pastoral work and become themselves. They gain confidence even though their start may not have been very promising. They show us how pastoral work makes people grow and forms them, if it is done simply, faithfully and humbly. The people appreciate these qualities and give their confidence.

I find another positive aspect in older priests who have served for many years. These priests deserve admiration, for example for the way they offer themselves for work even when they have reached a certain age and a certain success. They have attained stability, they are satisfied and yet they are ready for any really important service to the diocese, the Church. This shows that the priest's personality develops in maturity and freedom.

I know of splendid examples of priests working in spite of their advanced age.

Or there are old priests who gradually detach themselves from life's comforts, money, their own advantage. There are numerous cases in which the opportunity arises to show this detachment.

A third example is their behaviour in grave illness and the face of death. I think of various testimonies to patience, resignation, faith and grace. I have sometimes found myself visiting sick priests who may not have been highly esteemed by their colleagues, perhaps because of their excessive zeal. But in suffering they show a wonderful freedom of spirit and have reached an astonishing state of purification.

THE WEB OF RELATIONSHIPS

I have no time to speak on this subject but I will read you the points I had noted.

What does this dense web of relationships mean? Does it mean these relationships are authentic? Or gratifying? We should try to describe what we mean by "dense".

I think we could take the classic description of friendship, in the broadest sense. Lately, for example, I have had to read something by Anselm of Aosta and I realized the place that friendship had in his life.

After we have established the meaning of the word we can reflect whether our relationships are really deep. But it is utopian always wanting to have deep relationships, because friendship is a gift.

Still we cannot lack relationships and if we did lack them altogether it would be a sign of spiritual and psychological sickness that should be cured. There are letters in which Anselm speaks of his Bishop-ship at Canterbury as the primate of England, and describes his total solitude, the difficulty of trusting anyone, discovering he was being tricked by all. In these cases one is bound to suffer severely.

Another note. When relationships exist they naturally grow with time and then the problem of watchfulness arises. I refer in particular to exclusive friendships with women for priests. Exclusive friendships are usually inadvisable. However when the relationships are legitimate and appropriate, it is necessary to be watchful, maybe sharing them with other friends.

Of course relationship problems last throughout life, because personal relations are fundamental and time after time new aspects of the problem may arise.

PARTICULAR INSTANCES

A tension that can go slack

The Lord tries to convert us: this is the Gospel. God is on my side and presses me to become his. The great problem in the life of a priest is therefore the following: How, among people on whom the pressure is "symbolically" so strong (because everything we say speaks of conversion, holiness, truth etc.) is it possible that this tension suddenly relaxes?

We must always look out for this. If we do not welcome God's action in us (which is the Holy Spirit, the Church's being) with constantly renewed energy, it can become a kind of curse. We perform actions and rites which have no meaning. This is a terrible thing to happen in a priest's life, so rich in itself but whose richness and strength may be lost. No one can say he has reached the point where he cannot lose the meaning of the things he does, not the Bishop, not even the Pope. There is no stage at which we are free of this possible loss of symbolic value.

So let us try to be watchful, to live humbly as we should, begging the Lord to keep this grace in us.

Staying in the Word

A problem about which I often reflect is how is it that it sometimes happens that even Bible reading palls and we reach a state in which we no longer want to know?

I am convinced we reach this point because we limit our vision and do not embrace the wholeness of the mystery of the Word, that is, of God revealing himself. Our meditation shrinks. We do not encompass the whole of biblical revelation, Old and New Testament.

Here too we need to watch out. It is risky to lay aside, perhaps after two or three years, the exercise of Bible reading because Scripture is in itself the life of the Church, the Church's book, and the Fathers always experienced it thus. We should simply get back in line with ancient patristic tradition.

Restored to communion

I believe sickness is truly one of the strongest metaphors of the real human condition. Jesus himself uses it as a fundamental metaphor of salvation and we too are sick healers. We should remember this. We are not people who first have been healed and then heal others.

Of its nature sickness closes in on itself. This is the very nature of suffering, so to speak. A cure means coming out of it.

In this sense the Church is truly a communication of experience, the covenant is the communication of divine strength to enable us to emerge from sickness and solitude. It is a fact that the sick person is lonely and much of the sickness consists in this loneliness. We have to bring these things out and see them in the light of Jesus healing the sick, restoring each to communion. That is healing.

It is the same process of healing that takes place in us. The starting point is always a discovery of our solitude, inability to communicate totally, and when we are not understood closing in on ourselves. Jesus is not content with a message: take the sick one by one, get close to them. We never have cases of group healing because it is the attention to the individual that counts. I think it is important to remember that it is in individual relationships that Christian healing can take place.