

THE GENTLE FORCE OF THE SERVANT

"Behold, my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased"
Matthew 12:18; cf. Isaiah 42:1-4

The theme of this message invites us to return to the roots of the Christian vocation, to the story of the first person called by the Father, his Son Jesus. He is "the servant" of the Father, foretold by the prophets as the one whom the Father has chosen and formed from his mother's womb (Cf. Isaiah 49:1-6), the beloved whom the Father upholds and in whom he is well pleased (cf. Isaiah 52:13-53:12).

The inspired text gives an essentially positive connotation to the term "servant," which is immediately evident. In today's culture, the person who serves is considered inferior; but, in sacred history, the servant is the one called by God to carry out a particular action of salvation and redemption. The servant knows that he has received all he has and is. As a result, he also feels called to place what he has received at the service of others.

In the Bible, service is always linked to a specific call that comes from God. For this reason, it represents the greatest fulfillment of the dignity of the creature as well as that which invokes the creature's mysterious, transcendent dimension. This was the case in the life of Jesus, too, the faithful servant who was called to carry out the universal work of redemption.

"Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter."
Isaiah 53:7

In sacred scripture, there is a strong and clear link between service and redemption as well as between service and suffering, between Servant and Lamb of God. The Messiah is the Suffering Servant who takes on his shoulders the weight of human sin. He is the lamb "led to the slaughter" (Isaiah 53:7) to pay the price of the sins committed by humanity and thus render to the same humanity the service that it needs most. The Servant is the Lamb who "was oppressed and was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth" (Isaiah 53:7), thus showing an extraordinary power: the power not to react to evil with evil, but to respond to evil with good.

It is the gentle force of the servant, who finds his strength in God and who, therefore, is made by God to be "light of the nations" and worker of salvation (Isaiah 49:5 & 6). In a mysterious manner, the vocation to service is invariably a vocation to take part in a most personal way in the ministry of salvation - a partaking that will, among other things, be costly and painful.

"...even as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve."
Matthew 20:28)

In truth, Jesus is the perfect model of the "servant" of whom Scripture speaks. He is the one who radically emptied himself to take on "the form of a servant" (Philippians 2:7) and to dedicate himself totally to the things of the Father (cf. Luke 2:49) as the beloved Son in whom the Father was well pleased (cf. Matthew 17:5). Jesus did not come to be served "but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28). He washed the feet of his disciples and obeyed

the plan of the Father even unto death, death on a cross (cf. Philippians 2:8). Therefore, the Father himself has exalted him, giving him a new name and making him Lord of heaven and of earth (cf. Philippians 2:9-11).

How can one not read in the story of the "servant Jesus" the story of every vocation: the story that the Creator has planned for every human being, the story that inevitably passes through the call to serve and culminates in the discovery of the new name, designed by God for each individual? In these "names," people can grasp their own identity, directing themselves to that self-fulfillment which makes them free and happy. In particular, how can one not read in the parable of the son, servant, and lord, the vocational story of the person who is called by Jesus to follow him more closely: that is, to be a servant in the priestly ministry or in religious consecration? In fact, the priestly vocation or the religious vocation are always, by their very nature, vocations to the generous service of God and of neighbor.

Service, thus, becomes both the path and the valuable means for arriving at a better understanding of one's own vocation.

"Where I am, there shall my servant be also."

John 12:26

Jesus, Servant and Lord, is also the one who calls. He calls us to be like him, because only in service do human beings discover their own dignity and the dignity of others. He calls to serve as he has served. When interpersonal relationships are inspired to reciprocal service, a new world is created and, in it, an authentic vocational culture is developed.

With this message, I should like, in a way, to give voice to Jesus, so as to propose to young people the ideal of service, and to help them to overcome the temptations of individualism and the illusion of obtaining their happiness in that way.

Notwithstanding certain contrary forces, present also in the mentality of today, in the hearts of many young people there is a natural disposition to open up to others, especially to the most needy. This makes them generous, capable of empathy, ready to forget themselves in order to put the other person ahead of their own interests.

Dear young people, service is a completely natural vocation, because human beings are by nature servants, not being masters of their own lives and being, in their turn, in need of the service of others. Service shows that we are free from the intrusiveness of our ego. It shows that we have a responsibility to other people. And, service is possible for everyone through gestures that seem small, but which are, in reality, great if they are animated by a sincere love. True servants are humble and know how to be "useless" (cf. Luke 17:10). They do not seek egoistic benefits but expend themselves for others, experiencing in the gift of themselves the joy of working for free.

Dear young people, I hope you can know how to listen to the voice of God calling you to service. This is the road that opens up to so many forms of ministry for the benefit of the community: other instituted and recognized ministries such as catechesis, education of young people, and the

various expressions of charity. Young people, in a special way it is up to you to ensure that charity finds expression in all its spiritual and apostolic richness.

"If any one would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all."

Mark 9:35

This is how Jesus spoke to the Twelve when he caught them discussing among themselves "who was the greatest" (Mark 9:34). This is a constant temptation that does not spare even the one called to preside at the Eucharist, the sacrament of the supreme love of the "suffering Servant." Whoever carries out this service is actually called to be a servant in a yet more radical way. He is called, in fact, to act in the person of Christ and so to relive the same condition of Jesus at the Last Supper, being willing, like Jesus, to love until the end, even to the giving of his life. To preside at the Lord's Supper is, therefore, an urgent invitation to offer oneself in gift so that the attitude of the Suffering Servant and Lord may continue and grow in the Church.

Dear young men, nurture your attraction to those values and radical choices that will transform your lives into service of others, to the footsteps of Jesus, the Lamb of God. Do not let yourselves be seduced by the call of power and personal ambition. The priestly ideal must be constantly purified from these and other dangerous ambiguities. The call of the Lord Jesus still resounds today: "If any one serves me, he must follow me" (John 12:26). Do not be afraid to accept this call. You will surely encounter difficulties and sacrifices, but you will be happy to serve, you will be witnesses of that joy that the world cannot give. You will be living flames of an infinite and eternal love. You will know the spiritual riches of the priesthood, divine gift and mystery.

--Pope John Paul II