

More Fire and Less Hammer

The assembly of Indonesia-Timor Leste is already over. Now we are about also to conclude the retreat, based on notebook 6, from The Forge in our daily life. We started the very day of the feast of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. It seemed a providential coincidence, since the retreat is focused on our identity as Sons of the Immaculate Heart of Mary.



I will not talk about what we are experiencing these days but a phrase that one of our Indonesian brothers shared with me during the visitation. According to him, to make progress in our missionary life we need "more fire and less hammer." I was struck by the phrase, not only by its reference to the symbolism of the forge but for its expressiveness. Incidentally, I read these days that the Spanish theologian Olegario González de Cardedal, recently awarded with the Ratzinger Award, compares his theological work with the task of the blacksmith who forges the metal through fire and hammer. We see that the allegory of the forge is present in diverse fields.

Are we having a lot of "hammer" in our current missionary life? If we understand by hammer a hard

ascetic life, based on renunciation and practice of mortification, I would say no. If hammer means to exercise repressive authority that crushes people, I think, with few exceptions, neither. But perhaps there is too much hammer in the proactive way we conduct ourselves today. The modern "hammer" takes the form of countless meetings, workshops, programs, tours, reorganizations ... We have the impression that "doing many things" we can achieve the goal of a change in the line of our charismatic roots. Often, however, we end being just tired and feel that everything is more or less the same, that life seems to pass through its own channels. The diversion attempts are good for nothing. Maybe because we have forgotten that the hammer blows on cold iron bounce, run out and are perfectly useless.

What does it mean more "fire"? Only the fire lights the fire. So, sticking to the symbolism of the forge, only a fiery reality can light another. In issue 342 of the Autobiography Claret speaks of his experience: "You, my Lord and Master, thrust my heart into the furnace of the spiritual Exercises and frequent reception of Sacraments."

The Word of God and the Eucharist are the two realities that can kindle a cold heart. Does this mean to fall into a spiritual vision that does not value all our efforts to dignify the personal and social life, by paying attention to psychological and social mediations? Obviously not.

The declaration of the last General Chapter quoted a paragraph of Claret in "The Well-Instructed School Boy" that is worth to be reproduced in full: "The fire of grace...over time, gets covered with ashes caused by the coldness of the atmosphere of the world which surrounds us, by our lukewarmness, by laziness in work, the fear of persecutions and the inconsistency of our resolutions; such ashes have the fire of charity covered up as if dead; what is needed then is to rake it, fan it, and add fuel to make it return to life and make it flame. For this we need to fan it and fuel it with prayer, meditation, spiritual reading, joy, vigilance of spirit, study and a major effort toward the virtues and we have to work singularly, watch over and obtain with greater diligence and fervour the salvation of the souls of people who have been entrusted to us"

Along with the igneous realities of prayer and meditation, Claret adds something that, as missionaries, we cannot forget: "We have to work singularly, watch over and obtain with greater diligence and fervour the salvation of the souls of people who have been entrusted to us." The consumer society, information overload and the rush are slowly drugging us and very often we do not realize it. They inject in our veins the venom of a soft nihilism that seems to repeat this message: "Do not complicate life. Nothing will change. Let each follow his path. Do not bother." What fire can come out from a poison like this that neutralizes the force of missionary zeal?

The cold messages of nihilism only can be cured with the warm message of the Word of God, that continually recreates our true identity ("You are a child of God") and "burns our hearts" (cf. Lk 24:32). It is for this reason that the Forge Project emphasizes so much the daily practice of "lectio divina". Later, continuing the transformation process, we will give some "hammering", but how effective can it be if previously our hearts have not been warmed by the fire of the Word? More heat and less hammer, yes. But you could also say this: more Word of God and fewer words.

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