

Homily Christ the Servant King 2024

Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O Daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your King comes to you; He is humble, just, patient, meek, lowly, and riding on a donkey, upon a colt, the foal of a donkey (Zechariah 9:9)

As I write this I do so humbly as a poor publican who enters the Temple to pray kneeling before The Lord saying, 'Have pity on me Lord for I am a sinful man!'

Reading through The Final Report from Rome on 'The Synodality' process (2021-24), I note that one of the recommendations is the renewal and reform of priestly formation. I have always believed that such a renewal is essential if we are to return to authentic discipleship in Christ the King., the essence of such a royal, priestly and prophetic discipleship being, 'If want to be master, you must be servant of all, if you want to be first you must put yourself last.'

During my seminary formation I was blessed with the Christlike example of many wonderful priests and sisters. These were truly men and woman of prayer, deep humility and were true servant leaders.). One such priest was Fr Vittorio Bongiovanni. When I served with Fr Victor in a parish in Port Loko, Sierra Leone in West Africa I was often moved by his Christlike service of the poor, the sick, outcasts, widows, orphans, strangers, prisoners...in a word he loved the poorest of the poor with Christ's love. He was available day or night to respond to their needs and lived humbly, like his flock. I remember one evening, we had nothing substantial to eat. Victor called me to the window which overlooked the compound. There was a 'scraggy' chicken below, strutting about the yard and as we observed it, Victor looked at me and I looked at him. All I can say is we had, together with the orphan mission boys, a veritable feast that evening.

On another occasion, an old man, a leper eaten away by disease, came to the mission. After speaking with Fr Vittorio, the old man was ready to return to his village. Victor called me and asked me to drive this poor, sick and marginalised man back home. I agreed but, aware of possible contagion, cleared the back of the pickup truck and helped the man onto the open deck. Fr Vittorio, outraged by my behaviour, came running out of the house and tore strips off me for further contributing to the dehumanising of the man, 'John, he is a son of God, and he sits with you in the cabin! You have a lot to learn.'

These priests, during my formation, were not enticed by money, status, ambition or power. They were instead, inspirational in their selfless love, particularly of the poor, their constant and unselfish availability to the needy and their pastoral sensitivity to and care of their flock. They always exemplified Christ's compassion, mercy and forgiveness. Whilst many seminaries, houses of formation and dioceses have been rocked by scandals including cases of abuse, cover-ups and misuse of finances, I

can honestly say that, in my 18 years with my missionary congregation I never once witnessed or even heard of any such improprieties. These missionaries were simple, holy and devout men and women, not perfect by any means, always ready to admit to and apologise for their mistakes and weaknesses before God and their confreres.

The first step, I believe, in the reform of priestly formation must be to ensure those directly responsible for the education of future priests: reflect in their own lives Christ's servant leadership; be men and women of constant prayer and deep humility; be focussed on following Jesus in their love and service of the most vulnerable; epitomise in their lives the compassionate and merciful Jesus of The Gospel and be available day and night ready and willing to respond to the pastoral needs of their flock. In the words of Pope Francis, they must be experienced shepherds who have the 'smell of their sheep', an awareness of and sensitivity to their parishioners' daily trials and struggles. Furthermore, the houses of formation of those called by Jesus to form future priests must be, 'outgoing and outward looking communities of faith' whose members are authentic humble followers of Christ, secure and comfortable with one another even to the point of calling out, as Fr Victor did with me, those of their number who fall below the standards of Jesus. They must not be, 'cosy and exclusive gentlemen's clubs'

Such a renewal to servant leadership in Christ Jesus would again fill our churches, people inspired by the lives of men and women doing their best to follow The Servant King. Grand expensive fundraising campaigns would not be necessary as people would give generously to a Gospel driven mission. Finally, The Gospel would, in the words of St Francis of Assisi, be preached by example and not words. A medieval 'feudal Lord of The Manor' model is clearly not working. We must surely return to embracing the 'Servant King' model of discipleship, because, paraphrasing the words of Jesus, 'The harvest is plentiful but SUCH servant labourers are few and getting fewer. Pray that The Lord may send more SUCH servant labourers into his harvest.'