

THE POOR AND THE PERIPHERIES AS GOD'S EPIPHANY

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Objectives

- To reflect on the importance of the poor and the peripheries in Claretian spirituality.
- To offer clues so that we discover an authentic epiphany of God in them.

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Let's make the most of our 120 minutes with this proposal:

- Let's take the time to get to know each other – 10 minutes
- Let's embark on the journey with some kick-off ideas – 20 minutes
- Let's take a moment to reflect together in small groups – 60 minutes
- Let us put our thoughts together – 30 minutes

Primary Clarifications

- The poor and the peripheries as preferred recipients of God's epiphany.
- The poor and the peripheries as revealers of God's Presence and Activity.

The Enigmatic Pattern within the Bible

- In the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament), God's revelation is conveyed to ordinary people, in humble places, and through simple means.
- The God of the Old Testament, revealed to us by Jesus, is undeniably a God of small things and of the simple people.
- God has a preferential option for the poor as receivers of revelation and as exposers of God's presence/activity.
- God is often found in the most unexpected and humble places, preferring to operate in the 'gutters' rather than in grandiosity.
- The same pattern can be found in the New Testament.

Jesus' Baptism (Mark 1:9-11)

It came to pass in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And immediately, coming up from the water, He saw the heavens parting and the Spirit descending upon Him like a dove. Then a voice came from heaven, "You are My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

On the one hand, this strange scene displayed a humble beginning:

- *Jesus*: A common, unremarkable name
- *From Nazareth*: An unremarkable, despised village
- *Of Galilee*: A less ritually-observant region
- *Was baptized*: Identified with sinful humanity

- *In the Jordan*: An unremarkable – often even unpleasant – river. Early rabbinic tradition explicitly disqualified the River Jordan for purification (The Mishnah)

On the other hand, the scene also displayed great glory:

- *The heavens parting*: Heaven opened wide for this. The ancient Greek for this phrase is strong. It has the idea that the sky was torn in two.
- *The Spirit descending*: The Spirit of God was present, and His presence was discernible.
- *Like a dove*: The Spirit was present and “flew down” on Jesus like a dove.
- *Voice came from heaven*: It’s rare in the Bible when we read that God speaks audibly from heaven, but this is one of those glorious occasions.
- *You are My beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased*: God the Father praises and affirms Jesus publicly.

Claret's Unwavering “Bias” in Favor of the Poor

- Our founder, St. Anthony Mary Claret, loved the poor and stayed close to those living on the margins throughout his life.
- He embraced “holy poverty,” patterning his life after Jesus (Aut 134, 135, 361-364, 405).
- A TESTIMONY: *The saint was very poor in his personal belongings and household articles and concerning his person, modest to a high degree and a lover of the poor (Fr. John Nepomuceno Lobo’s letter to Fr. Joseph Xifré).*
- Claret, like Jesus, was deeply moved by the plight of those living in poverty, whether it was material or spiritual: “... My eagerness to help them was as much spiritual as it was material” (Aut 569).

As the Archbishop of Santiago

- In Cuba, Claret dedicated himself wholeheartedly to serving the poor and marginalized communities.
- Santiago was a difficult field of apostolate: a far-flung diocese, with a poor communications system and a very hot climate. It had been without a bishop for 14 years (some important cities had not seen a bishop for 60 years). Socially, it was plagued by slavery, and the political climate was restless, with a growing separatist faction (Aut Footnote 341).
- However, Claret worked hard to improve and change the situation. This is because he knew that God loved the poor and that God is found in the poor.
- “With the Lord's help, I saw to the needs of the poor. ... I loved them--for the Lord has indeed given me a heartfelt love of the poor (Aut 562).

Wrongs to be Corrected (Manuscript)

- Claret presented a summary of the social line of his apostolate.
- Pointed out *the evils* of society.
- He proposed *remedies*: to attend to the instruction of boys and girls, to institute charitable houses, to provide good care to hospitals, to guarantee the proper functioning of prisons, to establish savings banks, to publish teaching books, and to promote positive play spaces to avoid idleness and vices.

Call of the Congregation to Respond to the Cry of the Poor

- As congregation, we are invited to be audacious and itinerant, with a search for the peripheries (QC 43).
- The Church has proposed to serve the Kingdom as a “Church going forth” towards the human peripheries: accompanying the life of the poor, inserting herself into their lives, and trying to understand the soul of each person, recognizing in them the signs of the presence of God... (MS 19).
- “Listen to God in the events of life; particularly in the events of the lives of the poor and those who suffer violence and injustice” (MS 45.4).
- “Sharing our journey with individuals and peoples, above all with the poorest, continues to be for us a great source of spiritual rejuvenation” (Men on Fire, 9).
- “To make sure that this option [for the poor] decisively affects our lifestyle, all our works, and our activities of evangelization. For this it is essential to ‘allow ourselves to be touched’ by the poor and enter into personal contact with them” (TMHL 67.1).
- We desire "to set nothing above our personal love for Christ and for the poor in whom He lives" (IPM 19, VC 84).
- “The anointing of the Spirit equips us to become fit ministers for the proclamation of the Word. This gift of anointing demands of us a constant commitment, one that is fulfilled in the measure that our experience of the Lord and our encounter with others, especially the poorest and most suffering, gradually transforms our life” (SW 16).
- “Proclaiming the Kingdom without practicing its values of fraternity and solidarity with the poor, entails a loss of credibility” (CPR 87).

Where do we go from here?

- Let us never forget that “we are called to find Christ in them [the poor], to lend our voice to their causes, but also to be their friends, to listen to them, to speak for them and to embrace the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 198).
- The poor and the peripheries are epiphanies of God. The poor are real people with faces, stories, hearts and souls.
- They need more than our pity, relief materials, and occasional acts of solidarity.

Temptations

- Showing only occasional solidarity when there is a need for an emergency response.
- Limiting ourselves to projects and fundraising. At times we end up reducing the mission to a few project-based apostolates (“sterile welfarism!”)
- Seeing the poor as recipients and us as donors. This creates a sense of unhealthy dependence.
- The temptation to build a center in the periphery, creating a divide and boundary—a Pedestal in the periphery. Mansions in the mission place!
- Instead of insertion into the realities of the people, adopting a lifestyle that does not reflect the realities around.

- Tendency to see the poor as miserable and unlucky creatures rather than vessels carrying God's image and epiphany.
- Making the poor into exhibits and tools for money-making (fund-raising). NGO mentality.
- Uncovering of the manifestation of God in the poor and the peripheries begins with encounter and acknowledgment. Sometimes there is the temptation to preclude the manifestation with feelings of pity and a project mindset.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning (English Poet, 1806-1861)

“Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God,
But only he who sees takes off his shoes;
The rest sit round and pluck blackberries.”

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Pope Francis

- If “the universe unfolds in God, who fills it completely... there is a mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person's face” (LS 233, LD 65).
- “Do not take your eyes off the poor” (Tb 4:7) – Pope Francis' Message for the 7th World Day of the Poor (2023)
- The poor and the peripheries are afire with God: how can we fail to notice it?

Group Activity

1. What can we learn from the people of the peripheries (The mysterious wisdom, the paradox at the edge, the upside-downness of God)?
2. What missionary attitudes and dispositions do we need to uncover God's epiphany in the poor and the peripheries?
3. What temptations and pitfalls should we avoid? How?
4. Identify some concrete examples of authentic Claretian engagement with those in the margins.