

LIFE AND WELL-BEING CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

11TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Planting a tender shoot

FR CHARLÓ CAMILLERI, O.C.A.R.M.



Today's readings: Ezekiel 17:22-24; Psalm 92:2-15; 2 Corinthians 5:6-10; Mark 4:26-34

In *L'Albero della vita* (2025), Amedeo Cencini, a Canossian priest and psychotherapist specialising in ongoing formation and psychological issues in priestly and religious life, takes the universal archetype of the tree of life, applying it as a new paradigm for the formation of priests and religious.

Cencini's publications and studies are best-selling classics in the area of psycho-spiritual formation. He has been a catalyst in stimulating dialogue between psychology and theology in an attempt to discover how the psychological theoretical framework can enrich theology in its own formulation and not stopping at being used merely in terms of pastoral implementation when dealing with disorders or pathological issues.

He points out that both psychology and theology in all their dimensions are both concerned with freedom, healing and health/salvation (*salus*). What's intuitive in the proposed perspectives and theoretical

frameworks is that the principles applied to formation of priests and religious are equally valid in the formation of the fundamental Christian vocation.

Cencini takes up the tree of life image as being symbolic of personal and collective identity, of continuity, growth, expansion and permanence. A tree grows slowly but steadily and, through its adaptive potential, it endures seasons, its bark peels to allow expansion, it sheds old leaves and branches to make room for new shoots to spring forth.

He shows how old models of human-spiritual formation have necessarily to be reshaped and perhaps also abandoned, making room for new, suitable and efficacious contemporary paradigms. Models of perfection, observance and conformity, self-realisation and self-acceptance can be reshaped into a more integrative framework that includes memory formation (affective, rational, spiritual), the capacity to integrate the past, as well as the ability to act and respond (i.e. taking responsibility), fulfilling the core of human existence. On the theological plane this includes "the recapitulation of everything in Christ" (Eph 1:10). This model, Cencini claims, leads to the embrace of one's truth, while gradually processing towards creative self-transfiguration or reshaping.

In the reading from Ezekiel 17, the Lord vows to his people: "I, too, will take from the crest of the cedar, from its topmost branches tear off a tender shoot, and plant it on a high

and lofty mountain [...]. It shall put forth branches and bear fruit, and become a majestic cedar."

This parable counteracts a previous allegory about a majestic and powerful eagle who "took hold of the top of a cedar, he broke off its topmost shoot and carried it away to a land of merchants, where he planted it in a city of traders". Once there, this sapling withered and became rotten. The historical context is that of Jehoiachin, who ended up being deposed and taken in exile along his subjects by Nebuchadnezzar. The prophet interprets history in the light of unfaithfulness to God and the covenant, through wrong political choices.

While human pride, greed, thirst for power and unprincipled attempts to grow, expand and reach the heights – alas the breaking of the topmost shoot – lead to destruction and death, God's salvific action – alas the pruning of the tender shoot – presages new life and reshapes the story of Israel, integrating its past failures, delivering it and leading it to well-being and salvation.

Christians in Corinth are reminded by the Apostle Paul to constantly be courageous in faith, to grow and mature in that which is good, aspiring to please the Lord until judgement day, when all will receive back the equivalent of their choices, their recompense. If we sow and invest in what is good, we will reap good produce, and "dwell" like birds "in the shade" of the mustard tree. The choice is ours, with the help of grace.

Wheat and darnel

FR ALFRED MICALLEF



During the second week of Easter, the Church proposed to us a reading from the Acts of the Apostles that gives a picture of the life of the first Christians: "None of the members was ever in want, as all those who owned land or houses would sell them and bring the money from the sale of them, to present it to the apostles; it was then distributed to any who might be in need" (Acts 4:34-35).

Scripture scholars tell us that this Christian Communism described by Luke is not to be taken literally. The situation was not so idyllic, although they saw to it to help the poor and took up collections even in faraway places to help them.

A few not so exemplary situations also existed. Jewish Christians wanted to impose the Mosaic Law onto the Christians coming from paganism; there were disagreements among them, and other faults. Paul and Barnabas, who had journeyed and worked together, disagreed and parted ways.

It is not difficult to see that the situation has not changed much in our times. We

often read about scandals involving Church members, paedophile priests and religious, Church authorities protecting them, misconduct and, sometimes, even cruelty in orphanages and schools for indigenous children run by the Church.

On the other hand, the Church also runs institutions in which lots of care and love is shown towards those under their protection. Limiting ourselves to Malta, we are all aware of the care and love shown to the disabled at the Siggiewi home or that shown by the Ursuline Sisters, by Caritas, by the Jesuit Refugee Service, and others. Such caring Church institutions are not limited to Malta but exist wherever the Church is present.

All this helps us to get to know our Church as it truly is, saint and sinner at the same time. Many are scandalised at the sinfulness of the Church – 'scandal' means, literally, to stumble, as happens when someone walking stubs a bump in the street and falls.

In a way this is understandable, but it happens mainly because we expect the Church to be pure, forgetting that Christ founded it on the rock, Peter, who had disowned him only a few days before, and that the Church is made up of fallible and fragile human beings.

Some may be tempted to somehow get rid of the bad ones, under the illusion that we are just, and not saints and sinners like the Church itself. Our Lord had a different solution: "Let them grow together," he told those



Just like in a wheatfield, good and evil coexist within the Church. PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

servants who wanted to pluck out the dandel from the wheatfield. In this world we all live together. In the Church it should be the same. Judgement comes only at the very end.

Pope Francis calls the Church a field hospital. In war, people get wounded and need immediate medical help. A field hospital sees to this. All of us, that is, all members of the Church, are wounded sometimes. The Church offers healing and consolation.

If we revisit our expectations of the Church we will not be scandalised. It's not that we approve evil but, like the Lord of the parable, we let the wheat and the dandel grow together in the hope that conversion will happen, because God does not write off anybody.

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QUOTES & NEWS

Pope: Jesus was a free man

In his Angelus address last Sunday, Pope Francis spoke about Jesus as a free man:

"He was free in the face of wealth, in the face of power, in the face of the quest for fame. And this is important for us too. Indeed, if we let ourselves be conditioned by the quest for pleasure, power, money or consensus, we become slaves to these things. If instead we allow God's freely given love to fill us and expand our heart, and if we let it overflow spontaneously, by giving it back to others, with our whole selves, without fear, calculation or conditioning, then we grow in freedom, and spread its good fragrance around us too."

"So we can ask ourselves: am I free? Or do I let myself be imprisoned by the myths of money, power and success, sacrificing my serenity and peace, and that of others, to these things? In the places where I live and work, do I spread the fresh air of freedom, sincerity and spontaneity?"

'Gambling humiliates'

Addressing an anti-gambling conference, Cardinal Matteo Zuppi of Bologna, president of the Italian Episcopal Conference, said "gambling humiliates people" and "takes away dignity". The cardinal said "there is so much suffering and loneliness" tied to gambling.

"We are going backwards on gambling; the situation has worsened. There is a very dangerous intertwining of the legal and the illegal that is cloaked in shameful justifications."

Bishops' advice to UK voters

In a statement released after the UK election was announced, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales said during the election campaign, Catholics should be looking at: criminal justice, domestic poverty, family life and taxation, education, environment, international relations, human rights and peace building, life issues and migration.

While calling on voters to be "willing to get involved and vote" they also added that Christians can have a different way of looking at politics.

(Compiled by Fr Joe Borg)