

Less in Lent

The Irish Catholic, March 3, 2011; Fr Brian O'Toole CSSp

'Less' is a word that we have certainly taken to in recent times. Our food is sugarless and fatless. Our new gadgets are cordless and wireless. We know that too many people are homeless and jobless. Our politics shameless; our education system is deemed by many as useless and our banks worthless.

There are times when we find the word 'less' very disconcerting. We hear about peak-oil and money running out. The situation in turbulent oil producing countries makes us worried that pipelines will dry up. Less can indicate decline, shortage, shortfall, resources running out and we don't like this because in many ways we have become addicted and frenetic to having what we want and having it now. Our desires have become swollen and we want more, more, more.

But during Lent as we look inward we may discover that the law of the human spirit differs from the law of matter. Matter is about quantity, amounts, amassing, increasing and having. On the other hand the way of the human spirit is about cutting down clutter and thus unburdening, letting go. For the human spirit **less can be more**. It is in inverse proportion. Absence, emptiness, dryness are often great wells of growth and possibility; the truth of the old adage "absence makes the heart grow fonder". Times of silence can lead us into a deep stillness that is comforting, challenging and life-giving. We know this from our positive life experiences; generosity has its own reward and hospitality has that willingness to pull out all the stops, to go the extra mile. This secret is expressed in the prayer of St. Francis of Assisi "For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are

pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life"

Lent is a time to look at ourselves, examine our own choices and priorities, and test the love of Christ in our own lives. It challenges us to let go of our treating everything as a commodity including our relationships to be used for our advantage. It is an opportunity for us to embrace another approach; to experience life as a free gift and to experience one another as persons with unique stories and gifts.

Less and living lightly

A lifestyle of less helps us and helps our planet. Many of us drive cars. We need to ask ourselves whether we could **use public transport more frequently** for our longer journeys and whether we could walk or use a bicycle for shorter distances. One of the simplest actions each of us can do is simply to **use less water** – especially hot water. When washing objects or ourselves do we need to run the taps at full force. What about **our houses**: how well insulated are they? Could we install more insulation and ensure that drafts are eliminated? Much of the **food** we consume **comes from far-off parts** of the world. We in Ireland have come to see other continents as our orchards and farms, the places where our fruit and much of our food and drink is produced. It has been calculated that the shipping of these goods from distant lands adds significantly to global warming. What about returning **to relying more on local food, drink, and other products**? To begin a very practical initiative would be to **grow some of our own vegetables**, as many families did in the past.

How to get started

Perhaps the most important thing we can all do in the ways of less is *to scale down what we see as our needs*. As we cut down on our wasteful use of resources and scale down our needs, it may be helpful for us to reflect on the simple life lived by Jesus. He taught us how to use and enjoy creation without abusing and exploiting it.

Let us begin to take the first steps by practising *Repair, Reduce, Reuse, Recycle and Refuse*. Letting clothes and carpets grow old and wear out; *repairing* them as “a stitch in time...” If the item is not really necessary then *refuse* to buy or have it. *Reuse* what you already have. We’re imprisoned by our wants, and we’re clogging up the earth so why not *reduce*? *Recycle* what you no longer need. Living this way is truly simple, and not that hard to do, once you get the routine of it.

The Missionary Vocation; Brian O’Toole C.S.Sp.; *The Irish Catholic*; 17 February 2011

The fact that to be a Christian is to be a missionary was highlighted by the Second Vatican Council. The Christian vocation or calling is fundamentally one – it is the same for everybody; every Christian is called by God to continue his work on earth. Each of us is called to mission, wherever we are. The different ways that each person carries out this task in the concrete are the ‘specific vocations’ of each individual and unique calling. We have mission in our family, in our work, in our school, in our community, in our parish. We have mission in welcoming the stranger and working for fairness in our world.

This reflection looks a little at the specific vocation of being a ‘missionary’ in the traditional sense of the term; it is about the very particular mission within the general

mission to give witness to Christ. Some among us are called to reach out beyond our home boundaries to those in foreign lands who have never hear or scarcely heard about the good news; to those who have not experienced the good news in action. In this regard our thoughts turn to places like Africa, Asia and South America; to the places where Irish people have travelled in their droves to spread the gospel. And while this movement continues today we also notice reverse trends, of missionaries coming from these continents to share the gospel in Ireland.

“If one part is hurt, all are” (1 Cor12,26): When we take a good look at the world we are living in, it is hard not to be struck and saddened by the ignorance, poverty, injustice and oppression that is part of the daily lot of so many people. St. Paul drew out the implications of the teachings of Christ in response to such situations when he reminded us that we are all parts of the body of the Risen Jesus and then concluded: “If one part is hurt, all parts are hurt with it”. The missionary who truly experiences the reality of being part of the body of Christ in our world today, feels called to be with people who are hurt and suffering; to be present with them so as to assure them that the love of Christ is lasting and real.

The missionary vocation is about being fired with the ideas and values of following Christ even when this goes against the ideas and values of his/her own society or peer group. Much of what is considered success in Ireland today is based on the selfishness, materialism, self-interest, ambition and competition of our age – all of which are often so evident in

the structures of our educational systems, capitalist economy, civil, political and church institutions. The missionary is called to give witness to another type of success – the success of the self-fulfillment of the person who lives by the Christian values of love, service, reaching out to those in need, generosity, leaving one’s own culture and family to make Christ present and alive to another culture, another people.

The missionary wants to help establish and support a local Church; not just to increase the total number of Catholics, not merely to put another parish flag on the ecclesiastical map but that the local Church be a truly Christian community, be an effective sign of the presence of Jesus. The Church as a Christian community is different from all other groups. It does not exist for its own sake. Its purpose is not just the good of its own members. The Christian community is always a servant community. It puts into practice the mission of Jesus in our day – bringing the good news to the poor, setting the oppressed free, and working for justice and reconciliation, caring for our Earth. The missionary serves as a member of this local Church seeing the need to “discriminate in favour of the poor”. Serving in the local Church is an expression of global solidarity; it is about taking responsibility for one another.

The missionary vocation is a call to Christian leadership, which is a delicate and difficult thing. Like all Christian leadership, it is a form of service, in imitation of Christ who said: “Whoever wants to be first must place himself last of all and be the servant of all” (Mark, 9,

34). The missionary does not go to other people as someone superior, as someone who can do things for them, as someone who knows their needs and problems and has all the answers to their questions and desires. He/She goes as someone who loves people and wants to be of service. The missionary serves real needs and must spend time with people, listening to them, sharing their life and their situation, entering into their mentality, traditions, ways of living, thinking and acting. The missionary is an agent of Jesus who will take the time to discover the real needs of this particular people leading to fullness of life in mind, body and spirit.

The missionary vocation grows, develops and responds to changing socio-cultural circumstances. Today “reaching out beyond our home boundaries to those in foreign lands” embraces the new categories of people to which missionaries are called. There are, for example the mega cities of the world and there are particular groups like youth, migrants, refugees and those living in situations of dire poverty. There are also newly emerging cultures, such as the culture created by mass media, communications and new areas of activity such as the rights of women, trafficking of children, gay and other minority groups. There are the challenges of combating poverty and hunger, responding to climate change, care of the environment and to the ravages of war. Thus, not only are the horizons of the missionary vocation wider than ever before they are also more challenging.

We could learn much about *the missionary vocation* by quoting church documents such as: Ad Gentes (Vat 11), Evangelii

Nuntiandi (Pope Paul VI, 1975), Redemptoris Missio (Pope John Paul II, 1991), but I leave these for another time, I choose rather for these last lines to quote from Joe Humphries' recent book *God's Entrepreneurs: How Irish Missionaries tried to change the world*: "...missionaries are not saints. They are human beings, with flaws, who are struggling sometimes to perform saintly acts. They annoy, they agitate, they push boundaries and they don't like resting on their laurels. They are no shrinking violets but, rather, they are men who sometimes stand between cocked rifles and their flock, and they are 'women on fire with the healing love of God', to quote one congregation's mission statement. They are, at heart, people of action, these worn-sandalled philanthropists. They are the Good News army. They are God's entrepreneurs".