

Activism: *The Enemy of Patience*

by Don Giuseppe, S.C.

The disciples of Jesus consider their actions as manifestations of God's active presence. They act not to prove their power, but to show God's power and mercy; they act not to redeem people but to reveal God's redemptive grace; they act not to create a new world, but to open hearts, eyes and ears to the same God who calls us, redeems us and renews us.

In our society, which labels worth with productivity, patient action is very difficult. We tend to be so concerned with doing something worthwhile, making changes, planning, organizing, structuring, and restructuring, that we often seem to forget that it is not "we" who redeem, but God. To be busy, "where the action is," and "on top of things" often seem to have become goals themselves. We then have forgotten that our vocation is not to give visibility to our activity but to God's compassion.

Action, as the way of a compassionate life, is a difficult discipline precisely because we are so in need of recognition and acceptance. This need can easily drive us to conform to the expectation that we will offer something "new." In a society that is so focused on new encounters, so eager for new events, and so hungry for new experiences, it is difficult not to be seduced into impatient activism. Often, we are hardly aware of this seduction, especially since what we are doing is so obviously "good and religious." But even setting up a relief program, feeding the hungry, and assisting the sick could be more an expression of our own needs than of God's call.

But let us not be too moralistic about it: We can never claim pure motives, and it is better to act with and for those who suffer than to wait until we have our own needs completely under control. However, it is important to remain critical of our own productive tendencies. When our own needs begin to dominate our actions, long range and long term services become difficult, and we soon become exhausted, burned out, and even embittered by our efforts.

The most important resource for counteracting the constant temptation to slip into activism is the knowledge that in Christ everything has been accomplished. This knowledge should be understood not as an intellectual insight, but as an understanding in faith. As long as we continue to act as if the salvation of the world depends on us, we lack the faith by which miracles can be received. In Christ, human suffering and pain have already been accepted and suffered; in him our frail and broken humanity has been reconciled. Our action, therefore, must be understood as a discipline by which we make visible what has already been accomplished. Such action is based on the faith that we walk on solid ground even when we are surrounded by chaos, confusion, violence, and hatred.

A moving example of this was given by one of my classmates, Giuliano Tenconi. We were in the seminary together for a few years before he left. Then, as a lay missionary, he went to Uganda where he lived and worked for many years. One day he witnessed a cruel tribal war which destroyed all that he and his co-workers had built up. Many innocent people whom he dearly loved were slaughtered in front of his eyes. Later he was able to say that all this suffering had been accomplished in Christ and that reminder prevented a mental and emotional breakdown. He married a local woman and had two children. His deep understanding of God's saving act enabled him not to leave, but to remain active in the midst of the unbelievable misery and to face the real situation with open eyes and open ears. His actions were not simply an attempt to rebuild and thus to overcome the evils he had seen, but a reminder to his people that God is not a God of hatred and violence but a God of tenderness and compassion.

One day, as he prepared to make the round of the villages to visit the sick, his jeep exploded killing all four members of the family. Maybe only those who have suffered much will understand what it means that Christ suffered our pains and accomplished our reconciliation on the cross.

When Blessed Louis Guanella built his first home in Como, Italy, he was praised by some but was hated by many more others. The socialists disliked him and fought his efforts with everything they had.

Father Guanella was reaching out to the poor who are easy prey to revolutionaries and criminals. The poor are often exploited by the powerful for their goals and ambition and used as fuel to increase disorder, destruction and subversive activities.

Father Guanella helped the poor by praying with them and making them aware that love, patience and understanding will help us to get closer to God, not wars and revolutions. Jesus saved us with love not violence.

I remember a meeting with Mother Theresa in Hong Kong a few years ago. She asked how our work in the missions was coming. "I don't really know." I said. "After so much money spent and after so many years of work, I don't see any changes and I don't see any difference." "Don Giuseppe," she replied decisively, "we are here for fidelity, not for success."

I got my lesson then, but it's not easy to always live by it. What makes it difficult sometimes is the work of the "enemy." Satan is at work in the world and he has many allies at his service. Sometimes it becomes impossible for the children of the light to ignore the children of darkness. Sometimes it is necessary to confront them, with faith, hope and love, but the evil must be confronted.

This can perhaps be left to the next issue. «»

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