

Criteria of True Faith

by Don Giuseppe

Should there still exist any question in his listeners' minds, Jesus removed any possibility of doubt when he describes the last judgment, in which concrete acts of compassion are the undeniable sign of "unspoiled religion." Perhaps nowhere else in the New Testament do we find the importance of the discipline of action so clearly presented:

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, escorted by all the angels, then he will take his seat on his throne of glory. All the nations will be assembled before him and he will separate people as the shepherd separates sheep from goats. He will place the sheep on his right hand and the goats on his left. Then the King will say to those on his right hand, "Come, you whom the Father has blessed, take for your heritage the kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me; naked and you gave me clothes, sick and you visited me, in prison and you came to see me." Then the righteous will say to him in reply, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you; or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and make you welcome; naked and gave you clothes; sick or in prison and came to visit you?" And the King will answer, "I tell you solemnly, anytime you did this to one of the least of my brothers, you did it to me." Next he will say to those on his left hand, "Go away from me, with your curse upon you, to the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you never gave me food; I was thirsty and you never gave me anything to drink; I was a stranger and you never welcomed me, naked and you never clothed me, sick and in prison and you never visited me." Then it will be their turn to ask, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and thirsty, a stranger or naked, sick or in prison, and did not come to your help?" Then he will answer, "I tell you solemnly, anytime you neglected to do this to one of the least of these, you neglected to do it to me." And they will go away to eternal punishment, and the virtuous to eternal life." (Mt 25:31-46)

This dramatic scene vividly illustrates the meaning of the discipline of action. Action with and for those who suffer is the concrete expression of the compassionate life and the final criterion of being a Christian. Such acts do not stand beside the moments of prayer and worship but are themselves such moments. Why? Because Jesus Christ, who did not cling to his divinity, but became as we are, can be found where there are hungry, thirsty, alienated, naked, sick, and imprisoned people. Precisely when we live in an ongoing conversation with Jesus and allow his Spirit to guide our lives, we will recognize him in the poor, the oppressed, and the suffering. Action and prayer are two aspects of the same discipline of patience. Both require that we be present to the suffering world here and now and that we respond to the specific needs of those who make up our world, a world claimed by Jesus Christ as his own. So worship becomes ministry and ministry becomes worship, and all we say or do, ask for or give, becomes a way to the life in which God's compassion can manifest itself.

Blessed Louis Guanella was strongly criticized because his homes were filled with poor people assembled from all sorts of misery, oppression and suffering. His response was that God does not create, redeem and save us by category, but as individuals. God knows, loves and saves me as individual. I am His unique creation and He "knows me before He made me in my mother's womb." I am the reason for His death and I am following Him in His resurrection.

Father Guanella prayed for his poor and asked his poor to pray constantly for God's providence. God is a compassionate Father who dedicates more care to the ones who are in most need of His mercy. His prayers and his compassionate life reached a perfect balance when he let the Spirit show him the way. His spiritual testament to his followers was and still is, "Pray and suffer for the Kingdom of God."

Often we think that helping our neighbor means supporting the missions in foreign lands or contributing to the churches' drives. Our neighbor is much closer than we think. What about

looking into our own children needs, troubles, difficulties? What about our aging parents and how they are prepared to face old age? Notice the thousands of elderly in nursing homes whom nobody ever visits or blesses with a smile. See the person next door who is afraid to leave the house for fear of being robbed. How about the lady down the block who can't get her meds from the drug store, or can't go to the doctor. How many handicapped or elderly do not go to church any longer because they have no one to take them?

All that is needed is merely time to donate into action. Maybe we could find that time if we cut in half our television time and gave it to our brothers and sisters. After all, Jesus gave us time when he decided to become one of us, becoming a God with us.

The balance of prayer and action is of the utmost importance. The balance of action and prayer in our life manifests the redeeming presence of God in our world.

Did you ever hear a comment about workaholics? Of course you have. I am one of them!

Let's talk about it the next chance we have. ·

(Credit: Don Giuseppe. "Criteria of True Faith" *Now and at the Hour* Aug. 2001: 29.)