

*The Third Gathering of the Global Christian Forum
Bogota, 24-27 April 2018
Envisioning the Journey Ahead*

Morning Plenary, 26 April 2018

“As Jesus walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’”

1. In the ninth chapter of John’s gospel we read the story of someone who journeys from physical blindness, a sign of his social and religious exclusion, to belief in Jesus the Light of the World. Who is this blind man? The whole human race? The poor and discriminated of the world? Or the whole Christian community, Christians like us, who claim to believe in Christ, but are living in a situation of division which is a form of ‘unloving’: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35). But we don’t love one another, at least not enough. In the past, Christians have persecuted one another and waged wars against each other. Even today in places, there is rivalry and mutual rejection.

Our concern here though is not about our sins, or about who is to blame, “this man or his parents”, we or our forbears? Here, let us concentrate on the Spirit-filled transformation that turns the blind man into a courageous follower of Christ. "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him”. He went, he washed in the pool of Siloam as Jesus ordered, and he sees.

The neighbours wanted to know: “how were your eyes opened?” He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' I went and washed and received my sight." They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

2. How hard it is to recognize and accept God’s works! Is there some wonderful work of God happening in the Gatherings of the Global Christian Forum?

The leaders too doubted him; and that created a series of problems for the man. "How can someone who is a sinner perform such signs? (Because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath). And they were divided. So they said again to the blind man, "What do you say about him? He said, "He is a prophet." The beginning of the man’s faith: a first recognition that someone loves him for his own sake.

Even his parents abandon him, for the leaders had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue: "We know ... that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself."

Nobody around the man wants to believe that there is something wonderful happening here. But he knows there is! His faith is growing stronger with each rebuff. "Here is an astonishing thing!... Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." The leaders insist: “We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from." They expel him. But the man is now a believer. And while he is rejected by those around him, he has found his Saviour.

3. There is little room in the dominant culture of today for genuine faith in God and for faithful Christian witness. In this twenty-first century, human society is undergoing a revolutionary breakthrough in information and communication technology, combined with another mega-trend in the flow of human history that has enormous effect on religion and the Christian churches: globalization. Social media emphasize horizontal, immediate interests; they almost always ignore the transcendental dimension of life. Globalization subjects everyone and everything to standardization and regulation. Faith and religion are unwelcome intruders.

“Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshipped him.” “Being a Christian is the encounter with an event, a person, who gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction” (Benedict XVI).

4. Jesus had given him his sight but he had left him in real trouble: separation from his family, expulsion from his community. There is a price to be paid for the gift of faith.

We may be women and men of faith, but we are living in a broken, sinful situation. We are not one as we are supposed to be, as Jesus and the Father are one --- in mutual love. We are divided. Still, most of us are conscious that some form of visible unity is what Jesus prayed for. We don't yet know what that one Christian community would look like. Nor do we know how to get there. We are in an interim, transitional time: “already but not yet”.

If the Global Christian Forum stands for anything worthwhile it is this: to create the conditions for a new era of friendship and solidarity between all Christian communions, emphasizing the grace we share and not harping on the differences that divide. Only in this way can we fulfil the Lord's command to preach the Gospel to the nations, “so that the world may believe”. Let us not be afraid of one another. If we meet in fraternal love, the Spirit will surely enkindle in our communities an affective and effective love, as the theme of this III Gathering of the Global Christian Forum urges us: "Let mutual love continue" (Hebrews 13: 1). The love brought by Jesus, and poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, is the only energy and force that we Christians have for advancing God's Kingdom on earth.

We need contact and dialogue to really know each other and to trust one another, to learn from one another and to learn to work together, and not to use our differences to stay apart and separated, and much less to be in conflict with one another. In a world where we are reminded every day of so much human suffering, poverty, hunger and violence, Christians and their churches have an extreme obligation to show clearly before the world that they live by the Gospel message of reconciliation, healing and universal brotherhood. We will succeed only if Christians and their churches stand together, speak with one voice, and work together in mission, evangelism and service.

5. *Envisioning the Journey Ahead*: that is the title given to this presentation. Do I have a wish-list for the years ahead? I hope and pray that the Global Christian Forum will help to do the following:

a) call the mainline churches to take the new Pentecostal, Evangelical and Charismatic communities seriously; these new experiences of faith challenge longstanding positions regarding many of our customs, laws and traditions; and they especially challenge our lack of courage in regard to moral and ethical standards;

- b) call the new religious bodies to deepen their theological base in order to avoid uncritical understandings of Scripture and its implications for Christian witness and mission. This will facilitate the meeting between historic continuity and "newness";
- c) concretely, that means renunciation of all kinds of open or hidden proselytizing; it implies respect for one another as Christians, including mutual recognition of our baptism wherever this entering into communion with God and into the Christian community is performed in the biblical way: through water and the Trinitarian formula;
- d) that Christians who have been suspicious of the ecumenical movement will recognize that it is a movement rooted in the Gospel and inspired by the Holy Spirit; that the primarily spiritual and theological nature of the ecumenical movement be reaffirmed; that the goal of our ecumenical efforts be the full unity willed by Jesus at the Last Supper;
- e) that we move on from sterile discussions on structures and governance to a new appropriation of our shared Gospel faith: "He asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the way?' But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all'" (Mark 9:33-35);
- f) that our churches not place obstacles to doing together much more than we actually do: common Bible study, joint prayer, sharing spiritual experiences; co-operation in biblical and theological research; interaction between our candidates studying for ministry; co-operation in mission and social witness, in the area of development and the preservation of the environment, in mass media, etc.

6. And this brings us to the heart of the question. Nothing of what our churches hope to do and seek to do will be achieved without a renewal of our personal faith and our commitment to follow Jesus. In other words, Christians and Christianity have no future without holiness of life. God's words in the Book of Leviticus are addressed to every one of us: "Be holy, for I am holy" (Lev 11:44; cf. 1 Pet 1:16). In the end, it is Christ who lives and loves and works in us. It is the Spirit who enlivens us: "the measure of our holiness stems from the stature that Christ achieves in us, to the extent that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we model our whole life on his" (Pope Francis).

A few weeks ago, at the World Meeting on Mission and Evangelism, in Tanzania, I was asked to share a dream. I thought a lot about it. But in the end I thought: there is only one thing that counts: how present is Jesus in our lives? How active and transforming is the grace of the Holy Spirit in us? So my dream was about how clearly do I, and we all together, recognize Jesus as he passes through our lives, and how completely do we accept him in our hearts?

There is a poem, written by an Anglican priest about a hundred years ago against the background of the terrible upheaval of the First World War. The author called it "Indifference". It tells what happened when Jesus came to Birmingham, in England, or maybe to Bogotá, or to wherever Christians are gathered together:

When Jesus came to Golgotha, they hanged Him on a tree,
 They drove great nails through hands and feet, and made a Calvary;
 They crowned Him with a crown of thorns, red were his wounds and deep,
 For those were crude and cruel days, and human flesh was cheap.

When Jesus came to Birmingham (or wherever!), they simply passed Him by.
 They would not hurt a hair of Him, they only let Him die;

For men had grown more tender, and they would not give Him pain,
They only just passed down the street, and left Him in the rain.

Still Jesus cried, 'Forgive them, for they know not what they do,'
And still it rained the winter rain that drenched Him through and through;
The crowds went home and left the streets without a soul to see,
And Jesus crouched against a wall, and cried for Calvary.

(G. Studdert Kennedy, 1883 - 1929).

Too often, we and our churches have failed to see what Dietrich Bonhoeffer so deeply experienced in the drama of his own imprisonment: God does not come to our help, he does not save us, from his omnipotence, but from his weakness. In his weakest moment, on the Cross, Jesus redeemed the world. And "what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us". Too often, we and our churches want discipleship without the Cross, we want to evangelize without the cost of discipleship! We want our churches to preach the Gospel, without renouncing the pride and self-affirming that keep us apart and scandalize the world.

Our hope and prayer should be that our communities, and all of us personally, have the same transforming experience as the blind man: to hear the voice and feel the touch of Jesus, leading us out of darkness into the Light. Most often the Jesus who comes to heal us is not "in power and majesty", or worldly influence. He is likely to be carrying his Cross.

And if we see Jesus leaning against a wall and pining for Calvary and the Cross, let us never be afraid; let us gather around Him and lift Him up, and together go forth with Him, in the Holy Spirit, to preach the Gospel to every creature. Amen.