



## ST CASSIAN'S CENTRE: TEN YEARS ON (4)

08-B-36

### 4. Become good news

To try building up such a relationship is a good example of taking the fourth step - to «*become good news*», a step which follows the retreat and which is the main challenge of re-entry into the familiar world, which will not have understood my retreat-journey. The experience is, after all, not a «one-off experience», but an invitation to understand that this opportunity has been given to me so that it can be shared. The sharing starts at home and in school, in my place of work, among my circle of friends and acquaintances, wherever I belong. First I may need to hear some explicit good news about myself, and this will be the purpose of the evening activity in the small groups, which follows a Eucharist on the theme of Reconciliation, designed to offer a communal opportunity to acknowledge our guilt and ask for forgiveness. This second Eucharist of the retreat is a rather quieter experience than last night's, but, instead of helping to prepare the liturgy, each person will be invited to participate by responding simply and personally at key moments of the Eucharist which will draw on their personal experience of the third step, around which the day has been centred. There is no room here to present a detailed description.

For many participants, the affirmation experience of hearing *good news* about oneself turns out to be the most powerful experience of the whole retreat. Before the small groups are resumed, the leader explains the point of the forthcoming session to everyone and tries to create a suitable atmosphere. A rather theatrical but highly effective method I often used was one I picked up from Australia. I would start with a blank sheet of white A4 paper and tell the circle, «Imagine this is you, at 7-00am!» Then I would take them through a typical day, starting with a parental call («How many more times do I have to tell you to get up? You should go to bed earlier. And look at the state of your room! It's a disgrace.») and quoting remarks from other members of the family, teachers, schoolmates or workmates, and so on - which amounts to a constant chorus of criticism and depreciation. For each comment, I would tear off a small piece of the paper and drop it on the floor, until by the time the character whose day I was describing had ended up in bed, I had nothing left in my hand except a tiny corner of the once beautiful and complete page. And from where I stood, surrounded by «junk», I would remind the audience (who had been howling with laughter and recognition of the familiar situation) that when others fail to run us down we are accustomed to take on the role for ourselves, helping the destructive process by which we get torn to shreds each day by the hurtful criticism which we have been taught to level against ourselves. And holding up the little corner of paper left in my hand, I would quote St Bernard: «Man is become like nothing, brought to nothing. Indeed he is nothing... But how can he be nothing when God makes so much of him? How can he be nothing, on whom God's heart is set? If we are nothing in our own hearts, there is another opinion of us hidden in the heart of God». (Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermo V, *In dedicatione Ecclesiae*).

The groups would then be sent off to help their members discover that «other opinion» hidden in God's heart. Called to be God's voices, we would tell each member of our group what we liked or appreciated about them, what we felt to be their gifts or positive qualities. There were only three rules: one, that of honesty - it was essential that the exercise did not become insincere flattery; two, that the appreciative comment must not be qualified, or the entire effect would be destroyed («You have been very patient with me... *most* of the time!«); three, that the positive compliment must be accepted by the recipient and not denied («Oh, but you don't really know me!«). To start this conversation may not be easy — Another task for the leader's skills! — but once the youngsters start to lose their inhibitions and embarrassment, the effects can be extraordinary: tears of delight, broad smiles... When everyone has been complimented, the second half of the exercise begins. Each one thanks the group for the good news and is then allowed to speak briefly about one area in their lives with which they are dissatisfied («I'm lazy», «I don't get on with my younger brother», «I don't like such and such a person», «I'm very shy», etc). The group then prays with that person individually and aloud, asking the Lord to help them resolve the problem, heal the suffering and show a way forward. The experience of ministering to one another's needs in this way (unfamiliar to most of those who first take part in it) often proves to be a powerful and deep experience of Christian love, as it is described in I Corinthians 13.

The final morning of the retreat would involve all those who came from the same place meeting together to evaluate the retreat, discussing its high points, low points, values and challenges, and deciding in what way it had been good news. As a group, they would then be asked to work out one or two specific projects that they might apply to their situation at home, in school, in the parish or locality, with a view to sharing the good news. Each group would announce its intentions, plans and hopes (as «the Gospel according to so-and-so») in the course of the liturgy of the Word, during the final Eucharist - a liturgy of thanksgiving and looking to the future, before the final meal, preparations for departure and farewells, full (sometimes dangerously full!) of tears and songs and promises, which marked the re-entry into the familiar world.

In the next issue of *Lasalliana*, J shall conclude this account of St Cassian's Centre by describing the effects of the experience in a few lives, as well as giving a description of the series of Yesweeks held each summer at the centre.

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