

APOSTOLIC SPIRITUALITY

Nicolas Barre's whole life radiated a deep inner spiritual power, as is attested by many witnesses. He wanted his followers to be anchored in God. The apostolic spirituality of the Charitable Mistresses is characterized by four elements: -commitment to God alone, having Jesus as our foundation stone, a deep love for people, and a renewal experience at the heart of human sin and suffering,

Commitment to God alone

Fr. Barre asks us to keep in mind that God Himself addresses the following words to those He has chosen to work for Him: 'I ask for commitment or attachment to God alone, changeless and only center of your being, of all your thoughts, all your work and all your rest.' (L 5)

The Divine Lover chooses those He pleases as His specially loved ones (Jn.15:16). He does not want, and cannot be forced, to accept always those who are offered to Him, nor any claim on our part to reach the degree of holiness we ourselves would wish. In both of these ways of offering oneself, it is self-love that is at work ... It is enough to present ourselves before Him and to want to be His, without considering ourselves worthy to be His favored ones or His loved ones. Then we should get on with the task of forming and fostering the development of those whom He has entrusted to us in His love as His very own children. It is already too great an honor for us to have been entrusted by Him to such a great and holy task. (PM 5)

In her commitment to God alone, the Mistress of the Charitable Schools should be holy, learned, zealous, exemplary, persecuted. (PM 27). Fr Barre outlines a programme for the apostolic spiritual life:

- holy in order to make holy (Jn. 17: 17-19)
- learned in Christian truths in order to be able to offer clarification (1 Cor. 12:7)
- zealous in order to lead to salvation (Jn. 10; Lk. 15:3)
- exemplary in order to give good example (2 Cor. 13:10)
- persecuted like Jesus (Jn. 15:21)

Many people want to serve God, but most of them are not willing to be unconditionally at His service. Yet this should be the proper disposition of every faithful person, particularly of the Charitable Mistress who "should place herself in the hands of God like a brush in the hand of a

painter; like a quill in the hand of a writer. And note that a quill, if it is to write well, must often be cut, trimmed and shaped." (PM 31)

One implication of this metaphor may be that the good person does not merely apply the rules, but also re-creates them inwardly, on her own behalf. This seems to be the meaning of those passages in the Spiritual Letters where Fr. Barre emphasizes that the person must be as abandoned to the impulse of the Holy Spirit as a feather drifting in the wind. The rule itself strikes the stern, practical note that a good quill must be pared down to the point and often re-cut if it is always to form sound characters.

Jesus our foundation stone

The known form of religious life during Fr. Barre's time was uniquely monastic and not compatible with apostolic service of the poor in their own surroundings. The first Sisters were called to follow Jesus Christ in His apostolic life which would involve a deep spirit of service, love and trust in God's providence.

The essentials of the formation which Fr. Barre gave to his followers were:

1. to take Jesus as our model
2. to participate in Jesus' mission and inner dispositions towards God and others
3. to give oneself generously without being concerned about oneself so that Jesus Christ be known and loved
4. to enable each person to grow in the image of God and thus sanctify oneself.

Fr. Barre reminds us: "Renounce yourself interiorly ... and put Jesus there instead — this is the only foundation stone on which to build a lasting edifice." (RR 8). We can learn from Mary Magdalene and her companions: they had an ardent love for Jesus but for the crucified Jesus. Their minds were filled with His death, crucifixion and degradation rather than with the splendour of His glory. They did everything with the greatest care but they had no trust in themselves, in their strength because they began to say to one another: 'Who will roll back the stone for us?' This was a sincere acknowledgement of their own weakness and powerlessness.

A deep love for people

Fr. Barre's spirituality was imbued with a deep love for people and this is evident in his letters and texts. In considering the infinite majesty of God who is great and who desires to communicate with us, we become aware that the love of God which penetrates our heart, also enkindles love for our neighbour. This love leads us to do whatever we can, to give whatever

we can and to undertake whatever we can for the good of the other, without distinction and forgetting our own concerns. (L 57)

Let us forget about ourselves and give our attention to those whom Jesus had confided to our care. At the moment of our death, Jesus will find us worthy of our faith and even if we are not, He will make us so at that moment. (L 56)

When one forgets about self to any extent for the sake of the good of the other, the salvation of one's neighbour - to which one has been called by God — it is then that God sees to the salvation and perfection of the person who is fully committed to this service. (MD 12)

The Spiritual Director must give from his/her abundance and be filled to the brim so that his/her fullness can be outpoured:-

'Learn and teach; live and be life for others.' (St. Augustine)

'You should be a fountain head rather than a spout.' (St. Bernard) [MD 9]

In order to be effective, the Sisters require three things:-

Discernment of spirits in regard to the children and the other persons they instruct so that each be brought up in accordance with his or her own innate ability.

A deep love for people, but a supernatural, God-given love for the persons for whom they are responsible, behaving and acting like mothers, who, forgetful of themselves, endure everything for their children and who omit nothing that is for their good.

An innate attitude of pleading with God in order to obtain the graces and gifts of the Holy Spirit necessary for themselves and for those they seek to win over and sanctify. (PM 21)

Renounce self interiorly

The apostolic spirit which Fr. Barre always kept in mind is a spirit of disinterestedness and detachment. Those involved in guiding others in the way **of** perfection should act with complete disinterestedness.

To be a good Charitable Mistress, a woman must have generosity of spirit and openness of heart, always ready to give rather than waiting to receive, but she must beware lest all this spring from natural pride which spoils everything (PM 28).

The Charitable Mistresses ensure their salvation through their mission; one can go so far as to say that if they persevere in it, they will not be lost or damned (PM 9). Due to the influence of Jansenism, people lived in great fear of damnation. Hence people tended to focus a lot on personal sanctification. Fr. Barre reacted strongly against this self-centred spirituality. He sought to remove all apprehension from the Sisters and encouraged them to concentrate on the salvation of others. This would have been contrary to the thinking of the time.

It might be possible to count the number of people converted by Jesus Christ during His life, but those converted after His death would be innumerable. 'Unless a wheat grain ... dies, it remains only a single grain.' It follows that unless the Spiritual Director dies to the world and to self, the fruit produced will be very mediocre. (MD 16)

Some of the Sisters may be disturbed by the temptation to withdraw from their mission and from the exercise of charity towards their neighbour, under the pretext of working at their own perfection. The idea may even occur to them that before leading others to love God, they must first love Him themselves and love Him perfectly. This would be a big mistake and a grave error. (PM 4)

Fr. Barre saw self-love almost as a physical poison, deep in the marrow of our bones. The crushing of the self, to the point of being buried with Christ and making His death our own, was the crisis point towards which each soul was led.

Fr. Barre's vision is of a God who tears down the self to make room for His Spirit. Like a doctor, God may give us a nasty dose; or like a surgeon amputate certain members; but for those who trust, the cure is certain. The severity of God is a mere surgical instrument. We are in the hands of the most loving of operators. The lover and the destroyer work together. The gradual draining away of the poison of self-love prepares the physical body for its celestial transfiguration.