

RESILIENCE AND GENERATIVITY AS A GIFT AND A TASK IN PANDEMIC TIMES

The drive to sustain life

Story tells us that S. John of the Cross, while being forced to “repent” and change his mind about reformation of the order, was “kidnapped” from his convent in Avila and incarcerated in a hole in the basement of the convent of Toledo by members of the order which rejected his ideas and plans. It was during 9 months between 1577-1578 inside a hole, being whipped every morning and asked to abdicate reformation of the order, that he wrote – just with a small piece of paper and a small pencil – the 31 first stanzas of the so called “Spiritual Canticle” which describe the union of love between the soul and God as a source of it. Such a work is acknowledged as one of the highest works of mystical life. Why is it that holy people and martyrs gave the highest witnessing to the power of God and the love of Christ in the midst of affliction and suffering? Why is it that in extreme situations, strength, deep joy and a deeply sense of the meaning of life is grasped, lived out producing new life. There are uncountable cases of the life of believers in which in the midst of so many limitations, the divine grace empowers a believing and faithful heart and edifies the Church and contributes to the salvation of the world. The paschal mystery is again re-enacted in one’s life. Indeed, dying with Christ and raising with Him is at the basis of our lives as Christians, that is what we promise when we are baptized. Each one has to know and name, reappropriate, and live out to the fullest this mystery. Resilience and new life are intrinsically intertwined in the whole process.

Since the third week of March 2020, our parish church in Pekanbaru was closed due to the pandemic situation that was developing around the world and in Indonesia as well. It was not until the middle of June that it was opened again to the people and so far there is the celebration the Holy Eucharist on Saturday evening and twice on Sundays along with the monthly celebration in the outbound stations though is not permitted in the Basic Ecclesial Communities in the city. Recently from the second week of December until Christmas the parish Church was closed again due to the infection caused by Corona Virus of one of the members of our Xaverian Community. Needless to say, we must follow the established health protocols by the local government and the Diocese of Padang. Such circumstances raised a huge challenge because of the restrictions to move around, not to hold classes in schools and restricted work time in office or done online. Education, Economy catechesis and social interaction were restricted leading people to a very different way of life never imagined. We are now leading a new way of life that poses many challenges and opportunities for creativity and new ways to evangelize and proclaim the Gospel in a parish set up, interfaith dialogue and doing mission animation and vocation campaigning.

As it regards myself, at the beginning I was not aware of the whole implications and consequences of this so called “lock down” in which at a times if ever one goes out to do something, has to come home as quickly as possible and change clothes, take a shower and spray with disinfectant all the things that one touches. It feels burdensome for many and as kind of pervading fear about people, places and things controls the mind. Neurotic fear can be sensed when one feels suspicious about others being infected. Anger and nagging feelings also

come to the fore when one sees people around in the market, malls and other places not wearing masks, celebrating feasts as usual and neglecting the rules established by the local government and the local Church. A saddening feeling cannot be avoided when one close to us is infected, suffers isolation or dies alone.

In the midst of it all, during the celebration of Easter I started realizing something. I had a lot of time: I can read, pray and do something new. That is the time one realizes that life ought to go on, that service can have new faces and creativity demands new ways of expressing one self and the charism that inspires one's life. I am graced with life and blessed with so many gifts, and there are so many good things I am granted every day. One thing that inspired me a lot was an email I received from my former rector of Philosophy (1989-1991), Fr. Carmelo Boesso who, now, is at our mother house in Parma. He shared to me his path of faith in the events that took place in the first wave of Corona Virus in Italy during the month of March and April 2020:

Meanwhile I try to live this moment, certainly which is not so easy, with faith and love in union with Christ, who is present in each person who suffers and then I too live in this communion of love and I want to be watching out with Jesus and with the Virgin Mary being close to so many men and women in whom the passion of Christ continues today, being with them with my prayer and the offering of my little illness, consolation, life, hope and above all love. So, I experience my life enters in this ocean of love that accompanies me and accompanies everyone and gives me faith, hope and, above all, also within the suffering, an incredible experience of joy, as a gift of the Spirit (My translation).

Fr. Carmelo writes to me sometimes at Easter or Christmas season and once I had the opportunity to stay at his place in Borgoricco, Padova (1992) and saw how deep is the faith of the people in his place. I went to his parish and met with diocesan seminarians and was told that there were so many vocations for religious life and diocesan priesthood. While going around with him in the mountains, he told me: "When we face difficult situations, faith is the last gear of life". Indeed, in a mysterious way true life is revealed when we truly believe and that becomes the guiding path for every decision and action in our lives. I was edified by the faith of the people of the "Veneto" plain.

Always at the beginning of Fr. Carmelo's letters or messages, I sensed the words of someone who is happy, at peace and a man who believes and wholeheartedly wants to do the will of God. Stability can define his attitude. Faith begets that peace and joy that produces equanimity in his life. At my young age I just thought, it is a cliché he is using while writing but, as years pass, I realized, he writes what he experiences and I got the whole message while experiencing the crisis that corona virus caused in our Mother House in Parma. He keeps serving people and the community from a wheel chair and still I sense the same equanimity from when he started writing to me. I believe the life of Fr. Carmelo is in consonance with the vision about faith from our holy Founder Guido M. Conforti in the Testament Letter:

"spirit of living faith which enables us to see God, seek God, love God in all things, intensifying our desire to spread his kingdom everywhere...". [Testament Letter 10]

Fr. Carmelo and myself are spiritual sons of St. Guido Conforti and that spirit of living faith I perceive in many of my missionary brothers. I would say that for us, Xaverians, the underpinning reality of evangelization and giving witness to the love of Christ is faith that moves us and inspires us to experience being loved so deeply and consequently full of zeal, creativity, newness, are ready to go on, to move on and to keep living out that blessed charism. That is RESILIENCE in a spiritual way, produced by faith, carried out by love and constantly living in hope. At due time, we hope everything falls into place, truth is revealed and the divine plan becomes real. We keep watching out and in persevering; we just do what we ought to.

I believe, sometimes without being aware of it, God is leading my life towards what appears to be that will and that is the reality which is above everything else. It is kind of uneasy feeling and state because we are not fully aware of where we are conducted and because we are not in control, just believe and hope in HIM. At the same time, it gives me peace and joy because I see that the only thing that matters is what pleases God and the angels. Then I take my time and do everything as best as I can and have an imperfect sense of fulfillment, even if it is a Eucharist celebration in a far away outbound missionary station along with simple people in a wooden chapel. Thus I always get home very happy, feeling blessed because that is what God wanted me to at that moment. That peace and happiness become the fruit of staying "where I ought to be", in terms of the desert fathers: "To stay in my cell". That is why I wake up and living one day at a time when we just had just to stay at home and were not able to go out and to do any service. I had the meals with the community, walk around, pray, did some manual work, entered social media and came again with the same thought: "God wants just you to do what is possible and only this day". No time for depression, feeling empty or loneliness but sharing in the fate of many people who faced the same problem. That keeps me going day after day with a sense of hope that things will become well. Resilience keeps my heart and mind whole focused and what the Lord wills. There is nothing else that matters.

Reading again the message of Fr. Carmelo, I started comprehending something deeper in his lines. The source of his equanimity, joy and desire to serve even in the most difficult situations: he sees Jesus alive, present and giving hope in the midst all events that sometimes go beyond our understanding and states of mind. To allow faith in God to take the reins of our lives brings us to unsuspected untrodden paths believing that the divine presence gives meaning to life, death and the cross. In time which goes beyond human reckoning resurrection is also experienced giving hope and the same joy that we surrender our own selves to God. Being in Christ or in the Spirit is the same thing: Jesus lives in us and we travel on his paths at every moment of our lives we choose to affirm faith and the plan of God. Suffering becomes the spur that moves us towards the quest of meaning and when it becomes the cross, then we just surrender and wait in Him that a due time our tears will be turned into dancing. Resilience is the gift we have and receive every moment we are obedient to the faith. We are not crushed by it; on the contrary it is in such difficult situations that we experience weakness, doubt and pain that we decide to trust and to go on. S. John wrote:

"Amen, Amen, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone, but if it dies, it bears much fruit". Joh 12:24

True and genuine love from heaven was experienced by Israel in the desert, in a waterless and lifeless place, the real source of life is revealed. The empty tomb is another symbol of that power that keeps us going until the end. If fear or other feelings affect our mind, we will not be able to stand up until the end. "Man of little faith" [Mat 14:31] is the expression of a demand towards Simon so that he can walk along with Him above the powers of evil represented by the waters of a rough sea and a violent wind. For us Xaverians, resilience is a matter of faith, is a gift but once received we become accountable for it... Every gift entails responsibility and the talents have to produce life for others and for ourselves. For S. Guido Maria Conforti faith is the obedience to God in all the situations and events that we face.

We will live in this way if we make faith the absolute norm for our conduct and allow it to shape our thoughts, motives, sentiments, words and deeds. We will live this way if in all circumstances we keep Christ in mind; he will always be with us, when we pray, at the altar, when we study, in the many activities of our ministry, in our dealings with others, in times of distress, sorrow and temptation. [TL 7]

Without temptations, trials, and suffering, according to the fathers of the desert, we cannot become athletes of Christ; the scars of the battle make a follower of Christ to reach maturity. The desert purifies the soul, the mind and the heart. The negative thoughts always induce the mind with negative motions so that we fail to believe, to pray, to love and to hope. I believe Fr. Carmelo's faith sustains his journey. He is ready to serve and in union with others, he keeps that faith and so is happy and hopeful in the midst of it all.

Resilience, spiritually speaking, also is something we bring inside. However, its development depends on the decision to believe, to allow the divine power to remain, to transform and to empower us. But not everybody is ready or willing to surrender the self to this power unless we adhere to it; unless we believe. Jesus, the prophets and the righteous were willing to surrender it all to this power. Without faith it cannot be done, we just search for our own interests and that is against the "kenotic" principle of incarnation where the divinity assumes mortality and becomes one of us. Emptying oneself like the LOGOS of God is something very difficult because of the desire to act contrary to the will of God. Jesus said, "Get behind me Satan. You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do" [Mat 16:23]. To keep the divine plan according to our vocation or call requires spiritual resilience and its underpinning reality which is an empty self like S. Francis of Assisi and all the saints. If only my personal desire outside the divine will rule my life, for sure faith has not meaning. Living for God and others is something that cannot be worked out only with our own power, we need grace and the power of the Spirit of Christ. I compare resilience with the nativity of Christ: the desire and power to remain poor, human, fragile and sustain it until the end. It is something that can we touch and see so that we know that God stays with us in our human condition. It is a reality sustained throughout the whole life of JESUS. We believe that heaven came down to the earth and to sustain that presence humanly speaking is resilience while generativity is the resurrection. The sustained giving up of Jesus life all the way through love, faith and hope until the end produced the resurrection. It is something new in history, a total renewal of things and that reality is normally not seen and felt as the child in the manger of Bethlehem. No one believed in the

resurrection until Jesus himself allowed the pristine community to see Him. Though I believe that both realities belong to each other. The real emptying of one's self in Christ produce new life or resurrection. A self full of himself or herself cannot die or dies in an unfruitful way so that always remains alone. We are borne to produce new life. I remember a brother who stayed in a parish for a long time and after he was assigned to other community he said: "They have taken everything from me. I am not worth anymore". Sadly enough, we identify our elves with a role and love it until we make it an idol and thus with the leaving behind that role, dies also the desire to generate life. The empty self just believes like Job: "God gives and He takes away" (Job 1:21).

Resilience and its twin sister: Generativity

Then RESILIENCE it is part our own being as humans and it is also the basis for living a wholistic life in the sense of living according to God's plan, spiritually speaking. What is its purpose? To undergo suffering in this life caused by others or by oneself and experiencing powerlessness is something that can destroy us and lead us into despair and lack of meaning. Nevertheless, at the same time, suffering and trials can bring us to a deeper understanding of life like the lives of S. Ignatius of Loyola, Mahatma Gandhi, Siddhartha Gautama, and many others that experienced a vacuum, lack of meaning and pain. Deep suffering and distress, or the cross in theological terms, can produce new life. "For when I am weak, then I am strong" [2Cor 12:10]. Indeed, the apostle of the gentiles had a strong drive to live and to proclaim the Gospel and at the end his own blood gave a testimony to the impulse that guided his life. The love for Christ was so deep that he received the grace to keep that faith and undergo martyrdom for the sake of that love. RESILIENCE produces new life, that is GENERATIVITY. Saint Guido Maria Conforti believed that the religious life of a Xaverian in proclaiming the Gospel to peoples of others faiths is a martyrdom:

The religious vows bind us more and more to divine service; they are a total emancipation from Satan, from the world and from the flesh; they are a continuous aspiring to ever better things; they are a kind of martyrdom which, if it lacks the intensity of the supreme agony, is compensated by a life-long gift of self. [TL 2]

The grain that falls and dies produces new seeds that in turn also will die and produce more. It is believed that the blood of the martyrs produced new vocations, people who really want to become followers of Christ. Generativity here is not like products produced in a factory but the new life of God in others when they believe, love, move on and change for the best. That is the way a Xaverian produces new life, others believe in Christ's love and become part of a single family. A new perception and a desire to believe, to give up the self to others and a firm purpose of sacrificing oneself for the good others. It is not living any more for one's self interests but being a man or woman for others. So then, every gift and grace, the vocation, the community and the announcing of the Gospel produce something. A graced life lived out in service produces life in others. That is my joy when serving anyone. That gives my life a sense of worthiness, an energy that comes from being myself, spontaneous in expressing myself and specially experiencing how others believe in God and feel happy with my service. We feel

united and feel related to each other. That happened to me while preparing the catechumens in Jakarta. An experience of realization came into my heart and mind. Deep joy realizing that everything I have been through is worth it because now you surrender to Christ new sheep that want to follow HIM. You have struggled all your life to make them to become the sheep of Christ. It something very beautiful, energizing and produces a lots of joy. Besides that, the most energizing experience is to feel in communion with people, with a bunch of brothers, with the communities we serve. I feel touched by God in those I care for when I celebrate the Holy Eucharist in remote outbound stations. In a small wooden chapel with 20 people who sing with all their heart. It is something unutterable, full of meaning and makes my feel so graced and loved, an instrument in God's hands. We all live around the Eucharist. Christ in His people. If one receives the gift of resilience to stand until the end is because that sustained life and its purpose will generate something. Deeply inside us stays a drive that pushes us to give life, some fulfill it by marrying, others by service in faith and charity, some others by offering their lives in prayer to God. At the end we all live in all those whom we have served and loved. That is great and empowers the will and mind. Selfish living only generates loneliness and a sterile life, gloomy eyes and an empty heart.

Was Jesus a resilient person? For me He is the only source of resilience that stays till the end and produces new life. Fully human and fully God, He is the inspiration and power to go on. His resilience produced the resurrection. Without His humanity and personal will, salvation could not be achieved. He was able to surrender the self until the end without abdicating and that effort humanly speaking set the stage for the Spirit to resurrect HIM. Without His unshakable willingness to do the will of His Father we would not be able to enter in communion with God and and others and experience salvation. We would not be able to defeat sin, darkness and the power of death with faith in Him and the willingness to go through it all.

Resilience creates experience that enables to understand others that want to reach the same goal. Keeping the faith and carrying out the will of God constantly creates wisdom and to those who crave for real life feel attracted always to the wise who have experienced travail and had won in the battle. Those faithful and senior ones, can guide others in the same path. That is the sense of the term ABBA in the desert and in the monastic tradition in the West and East. We cultivate the faith of others in other to act accordingly, no to convey doctrines, knowledge and expertise but to share the self, life and the same inspiration that moves our lives. Many Christians, especially in the West, believe that religion is about knowledge, fulfilling codes, but the truth of the teaching of Jesus is that his preaching was a living attractive reality that changed many lives and thus repented. He taught with authority. He was a living reality of the love of His ABBA. Resilience produces life: energy, optimism, zeal, and pursuing those things that produce real joy and are according with God's will in one's life. I feel in communion with those who I have guided in their quest in the faith and feel inspired to be with them and to be of help too.

What new life was created during these months of isolation and solitude? Why to keep the faith when we cannot do what we are accustomed to? I learned from Filipinos, my companions of the class of theology in the 90's: "We do much without doing nothing". It sounds awkward

for a Westerner and it is like foolishness too. The truth is that the Sabbath was an institution to keep holy one day and to avoid humankind to become work-alcoholic. Jesus himself took some time while all others were sleeping and in a lonely place refurbished his energy and discover what was the path of his ABBA, his Father. In daily uncovering and appropriating in His actions the will of ABBA he became the Son. We are not speaking about epistemology but about a concrete way of life that produced a relationship among a real human being and God whom He believed was his Dad. Apparently, doing nothing became an investment: "I know now where to focus my energy and what to do according to the will of the Father. I love the Father because I act accordingly". Solitude and silence affirmed the filial relationship of Jesus with His Father. In fact, they all came looking for him and demanding more healings, more bread to multiply and to fulfill the desires of the crowds but He said: "Let's go on to the nearby villages that I may preach there also. For this purpose have I come" [Mk 1:38]. New life will be given to those who will meet him, new people will be pardoned, healed, fed, given hope and an inspiration to start anew. The old ways of fulfilling the Law will be done away with and people will know that Jesus fulfills that love in a new and attracting way. The desire to start anew, to set out in a new journey, to face new challenges and to leave behind what was already done is indeed the first fruit of the new life. Jesus wants to generate faith in HIM and in HIS FATHER. Faith is not static, reaffirms a dynamism that recreates new forms of thought, new paths, new ideas, new paradigms because is according to God's will and man's salvation. While a challenging new path is untrodden, the old one is left in the past. The first fruit of keeping the faith is that essentially recreates myself, my thoughts and have a new perception to act in a new way: I become a son, in the way Jesus too became a Son to God. Such a powerful drive moved Saint Guido Maria Conforti when he wrote the Testament Letter as a spiritual heritage for all Xaverians:

We will live this way if in all circumstances we keep Christ in mind; he will always be with us, when we pray, at the altar, when we study, in the many activities of our ministry, in our dealings with others, in times of distress, sorrow and temptation. In all things we will draw inspiration from him, in such a way that our external behavior will become the manifestation of the interior life of Christ within us. This intimate life of faith will protect us from the dangers of the ministry, multiply our strength and our merits, purify our intentions and give us the indescribable joy and consolations that will ease the burden of the apostolate [TL 7].

Apart from faith, something must move the will to create life. That drive is love. We love what we do and that according to the faith is the will of the Father as it was experienced by Jesus, the Son. The source of our calling is love and resilience is the faith in that love when apparently disappears and looks like absent in our history. Pain and travail make it hard for us to believe and to feel we are loved. It is horrifying feeling being crucified and keep the calm and peace to forgive our executioners. In the same way being quarantined in a hospital or experiencing the loss of someone dear to us. The highest point of His relationship with the Father is His prayer in Gethsemane. The will of the Father was above the will of Jesus because He loved the Father above everything else. Resilience in holding onto doing the will of the Father and allowing the self to go through the dark tunnel and at the end it produces new life. We cannot control it. Try

to imagine the kind of state that Jesus experienced after the resurrection. He was seen with the five wounds but alive, full of light and bestowing peace or Shalom to the disciples, first to his blessed mother according to a mystic woman, then to some women and finally to the disciples. The resurrection itself created faith in their hearts as if a veil was taken away from their eyes in the breaking of the bread at Emaus. Then they started generating that same faith in others. Was the death of S. Stephen that propitiated the conversion of S. Paul? It could be.

I have seen resurrected people and for me they are an edifying power that inspires my life. Those who were able to forgive the sins committed in the past and forgive all the debtors. Their testimony makes me believe all the more in the meaning of life because the person does not survive only to lick his or her wounds but to live with peace and joy and to transmit that with his or her way of life. Peace and joy comes from the simple experience of feeling close to God; of believing that because Jesus and God forgives, they can also forgive. Feeling loved by a faithful love is the most beautiful experience one can have in this life. It comes from God, usually through people. When we see that we are not perfect, life is not perfect and that this pandemic time is just like a part of the cross that purifies the heart then we become aware that life has to go on and that beautiful love that sustain us, which is already glorified and continuously sustains the world, inspires to understand the situation, to find meaning and still believe in that love (resilience) and to move on to fulfill the role God has in mind for each one of us. It is amazing, not fear, anger or other feeling but the conviction that it has meaning and we have to find it and live accordingly (generativity).

Is generativity measured in number of people we baptize or in the amount of money we give to others or in the amount of projects that we finished? Is the amount of teaching hours that measure the new life that is produced? Or it can be evaluated with the titles that I got in university? I believe that are only means to an end, generativity produces faith and it is something that does not depend on my personal perception but is a grace to experience a sense of fatherhood in serving and loving others while being faithful to doing the will of God as Jesus did. *Missionarity*, the real one, who changes the world is the giving of the self in Jesus's fashion. Being faithful to my vocation will produce many seeds to sprout and produce many grain. It sounds strange but some people who so much in mission some times feel that they did not nothing and that bothers their minds and hearts in the same way a rich person feels poor. The living out of the evangelical counsels is a life of sacrifice, keeping the rules, keeping the distance with people but feel alone and far away from others. It feels like being married but not having children. I guess, because I identify myself with my achievements and projects but sometimes without feeling that love of the Father and without loving others in what we do. For them it is very hard to enjoy all that has been done and have the mental curse of feeling that nothing has been done. What a pity!

We Xaverian are celebrating a jubilee during 2020 and 2021. One inspiration to keep faithful to the Xaverian charisma is keeping the memory of the past, remembering the spiritual heritage received from our holy founder is a way to "do the will of the Father" and to keep our praxis according with the missionary project of Saint Guido Maria Conforti. It is not that we want to re-enact the past but from what we received from the Spirit we try to live it out now and here where

we find ourselves. We own a countenance when we acknowledge where we come from and have a goal when we know the direction in which we have to walk. The Xaverian tradition has to be actualized in the contexts in which we announce the Gospel: as a community working along with the Regional Council and according to the Pastoral Plan of the local Church. As Xaverians, the local Church is imbued with the missionarity of our holy founder and directed to share our faith with peoples of other faiths. Mission animation in the local Church is essential part of our charisma too and lastly the sharing of this spiritual heritage has to be granted to those who feel attracted to become Xaverians. This is the way peculiar to us and the way we produce new life in the Church. Our happiness, peace, joy and zeal to spread the good news is related with this announcing of the Gospel to peoples of other faiths and religions. It is our identity.

We keep going on because that is the way Saint Guido Maria Conforti envisioned the character of any Xaverian in the present and in the new generations to come.

I wish to all blessed celebration of the Jubilee year.

December 2020

Fr. Guillermo Arias, SX.

Pekambaru – Indonesia.