



Sharing God's wealth with all people, multicultural parishes – a source of Scalabrinian spirituality

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SHARING GOD'S WEALTH WITH ALL PEOPLE, MULTICULTURAL PARISHES - A SOURCE OF SCALABRINIAN SPIRITUALITY

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"The mission that Christ came to realize among men consists in gathering together into one the scattered children of God." (John 11:52)

This scripture passage from John's gospel offers us an excellent image to reflect on this theme and how it relates to the challenge of being a Scalabrinian in a multicultural world. It speaks clearly to the heart of our charism, while at the same time it invites us to a mission of sharing God's wealth with all people. In this time of globalization the Scalabrinian Missioner has a rather essential and crucial role: We are called to "gather together" (in the name of the Lord) those who have been "scattered" (due to migration). I believe that while our role and our mission have always been very challenging, it has never been made more clearer than it is today. In the words of the July 1995 U.S.A. Bishops Pastoral Letter we are being called to build: *One Family Under God*.¹

It is within this context that we Scalabrinians offer some very specific traits for doing ministry in a multicultural community, as well as specific ways of sharing God's wealth with all the people. The traits I presume to offer are by no means an exhaustive list but rather they come from my own experience and they seem to be crucial if we are to find a meaningful way of living out our spirituality and charism in the 1990's.

1) Witnessing by our community

In an article entitled "Cultural Pluralism" the U.S.A. Bishop's Conference had this to say about the richness of the various immigrant groups in the U.S.A.:

"the mingling of cultures which sometimes created tensions, also brought positive elements of enduring value to the family, the Church and the country itself... Any move to suppress or even neglect this resource would make our total nation poorer".²

If we can make this statement in regards to the value of mixing immigrant groups within the borders of our nation than surely we can see the obvious value of an ethnically diverse religious community. It was never so clear to me as on the day we gathered at the cemetery for the final prayers for Father Joe Chiminello. As the six pallbearers drew near the casket I couldn't help but notice that we were Italian, Mexican, Brazilian, Philippino and American - a tapestry of nations that Fr. Joe would have never imagined when he first came to this country but somehow as we brought our oldest living confrere to his final resting place it became obvious to me that we are continuously called to bring to life the reality of the first Pentecost. In other words we by our witness are to create the same kind of excitement that was spoken of in the Acts of the Apostles -

¹ NCCB, *One Family Under God*, "A Statement on the U.S Bishops" Committee on Migration (Washington, D.C. July 4, 1995) p.1

² NCCB, *Cultural Pluralism*, April 14, 1980. In Pastoral Letters of USCB, vol. IV, 1975-1983 (Washington, D.C. USCC Publishing Services 1983), pp.366-367.

“all of us hear them speaking in our own languages about the great things God has done” (Acts 2:11)

We can never underestimate the value and importance of having multicultural religious communities. Through the existence of such communities we can be living witnesses of the charism and spirit of John Baptist Scalabrini. If we, from various countries and cultural backgrounds can live, work, pray and play together in peace, than by our witness we challenge others to do the same. We can really be a source of inspiration and hope that people of many nations can get along together and truly build *One Family Under God*.

2) Telling our story

One of the greatest and simplest tools of learning is “the story”. It is something that bridges all times and ages, all cultures and traditions. It possesses the unique beauty of involving people by inviting them in without threatening them in any way. In sum everyone likes to hear a good story and when they have heard your story they know something else about you and that just might lead them to tell their story.

We all know that our official motto is “Humilitas” but at times we have been a bit too humble in not telling our story. We truly have a tremendous story to tell and our mission begs us to shout it out from the roof tops and proclaim it to the ends of the earth. If we as Scalabrinians do not tell the story of migration then who will tell it? The story of migration needs to be told and there is a great value in telling it over and over again. We should begin with the stories found in the scriptures, continue with the stories of Bishop Scalabrini and never stop telling our own stories of migration, while at the same time constantly inviting others to share their stories.

As we invite others to hear the story of migration, whether it be our own personal story, our communal story or the biblical story we open up a whole new world of possibilities. They are challenged to remember their roots and see immigration not as a threat to be feared but rather a common story we all share in because in the end we are all people on the move in search of a better place. The telling of our story is a real way of ministering to both the newly arrived as well as the receiving country. It is an open invitation to break down the walls which can cause division and replace them with a common pilgrim history.

If we actively enter into the process of telling the story then we are given the opportunity to learn from our past rather than repeat the same mistakes. At the same time we encourage people to see that they do share a common history and that together they can create a better world. After all if Jesus himself used stories to get his message across, might we not do the same in hopes of moving people along from simply focusing on their differences to actually seeing what they have in common! I believe that our mission and our charism invites us to tell our stories as a concrete way of sharing God’s wealth with all God’s people.

3) Building bridges of unity

In striving to teach the importance of sharing God’s wealth with all peoples we must be about the task of “building bridges”. We know from human experience that bridges serve to unify, to connect, to aid in communications and to bring people to places they have never been. Isn’t this at the core of our call and our mission? To quote a popular phrase - “if not us, then who? and if not now, then when?”

We as Scalabrinian Missionaries are in a unique position of becoming “bridge builders” among the various communities of our multicultural parishes/missions/centers and cities. To do it effectively we must continually strive to move beyond the *small c*’s of community (eg. the italian community, the hispanic community, the american community) in an effort to build the *big C* as in the *Community of the God of All Nations*! As “bridge builders” we must set the example and be at home in all communities in spite of our own ethnic background. We are called to go beyond who we are (italian, mexican, brazilian, irish-american) to help people see that they can become “new creations” - called to build the family of God in new and diverse ways.

If we are to be good at building bridges in the ever growing global village in which we live then we must begin with ourselves. Perhaps we can turn to the model offered by Jesus himself when on the night before he died He not only celebrated the Last Supper but also offered to his disciples a clear cut and concrete example of service in the washing of the feet:

“You call me Teacher and Lord, and it is right that you do so, because that is what I am. I your Lord and Teacher, have just washed your feet. You then should wash one another’s feet. I have set an example for you, so that you will do just what I have done for you.” (John 13:13-16)

To build bridges of unity that are so desperately needed within the migrant communities we serve is to live out a profound sense of “Humilitas” in following the example of Jesus in the washing of the feet. Our spirituality calls us to begin at home in the religious communities in which we live and our charism challenges us to carry out the same humble service wherever we serve in the mission as bridge builders of unity!

4) Gathering the scattered

In Luke’s Gospel (15:1-7) we hear the very distinct missionary call “*to leave behind the ninety-nine sheep in the pasture and go in search of the lost one*”! At times we make the assumption that the ninety-nine are in the fold, however in our mission to the migrants we can easily be mistaken and caught up with living out this parable in reverse - that is to say *so busy taking care of the one sheep that has come into the pasture, that we never bother to seek out the ninety-nine who never made it into the pasture*. Our ministry by its very nature is to gather the scattered and to do this among our migrant brothers & sisters we should be challenged by the sense of mission offered to us by our Founder in Fr. Mario Francesconi’s “*The Spirituality of Bishop Scalabrini*”:

“Rejecting a bureaucratic and administrative pastoral activity and a diocesan government conducted from a desk, he goes to the people; he wants to know as much as possible each person in his flock; he wants to see beyond reports and statistics the real ‘state of souls’; he does not wait for the people to come to him in his episcopal palace, rather he goes looking for them, right from the beginning, in their homes in fields and factories, in schools and associations; he goes looking for those who are separated geographically or spiritually from the fold; he climbs spiritual cliffs and crags, to bless and comfort the faithful and eager to embrace those who are stray or lost; willing to risk criticism, slander, and even scandal from the self righteous to gain a soul for Christ: ‘I would ride on the devil’s back if I were sure he would lead me to save a soul.’”³

While the language of “saving souls for Christ” may be outdated, the spirit of our Founder definitely encourages us to “get out of our sacristies” and instead “go out to the

³ Francesconi, Mario, *The Spirituality of John Baptist Scalabrini* (Center For Migration Studies, New York, 1995) p.50



lost sheep of the people of Israel”.⁴ Our mission to and with the migrants implores us to be more creative in the act of “gathering the scattered”. Simply put our call is *to go to all and give all*:

- 1 from the recently arrived in need of food and clothes, to the migrant on the corner waiting for work!
- 2 from the migrant who has no voice because he has no papers, to the one whose rights have been abused!
- 3 from the migrant who has been separated from his family to the one who has lost the traditions of his faith!
- 4 from the one who lies sick in a hospital bed to the migrant who sits in jail behind bars!

⁵Our mission is clear, we must *gather together the scattered children of God into one* and to do anything less would not be Scalabrinian!

5) Creating a sense of mission

We as Scalabrinians are called to promote our mission in the fullest sense of the word. We are to be missionaries for the migrants and so we must create in all our ministries a true sense of mission. In preparation for the great feast we can maintain our sense of mission by “hurrying out into the streets and alleys of (our) towns and cities and bringing back the poor, the blind, the lame and (the migrant)”.⁶ In this context the migrant, along with so many other forgotten ones in our society, is to be viewed as a blessing in our lives because he/she brings us in contact with another view of the face of God. The migrant as blessing gives us all an opportunity to possess the kingdom which has been prepared for all of us - because in the act of welcoming the migrant we have the chance to welcome Christ himself.

In the building of the bridges of unity among God’s children both our mission and our spirituality call us to challenge both the “newly arrived” and the “receiving community” to see in one another the face of Christ. This will never happen by chance, nor is it a question of being tolerant of one another but rather it demands hard work and planning. In our parishes (missions/centers) we must take greater initiative in building relationships between culturally diverse peoples which are grounded in mutuality and respect.⁷ We must organize concrete short term steps as well as long term plans to make this happen. Perhaps if we can bring people together on various occasions to share the blessings of migration (eg. Feast Day of all the ethnic faces of Mary, a concert of ethnic music, food and traditions), then we can begin to create a sense of mission that is truly mutual in allowing people to be *in mission to and with one another*.

Let us view our mission as a symphony to be performed. We as Scalabrinians are the conductors in charge of making sure that all the varieties of instruments blend together in a magnificent celebration of sound. In this concert of diversity every single instrument has its place and needs to be respected for the beauty it offers but no one instrument should dominate. Of course the more sounds that we have the more difficult it is to blend them together but wouldn’t it be really boring if we only had one type of instrument in the concert of our multicultural mission?

⁴ Matthew, *Gospel of “Jesus’ Instructions to His Disciples”* chapter 10:5

⁵ John, *Gospel of “The Plot Against Jesus”*, chapter 11:52.

⁶ Luke, *Gospel of “The Parable of the Great Feast”*, chapter 14:15-24 v. 21b.

⁷ Bishops of Galveston/Houston, *A Local Churches Cultural and Ethnic Diversity* (Houston, Texas, Origins June 16, 1994) pp.65ff.

The heart of our spirituality as Scalabrinians is to create a sense of mission that is truly “Catholic” “*where diversity is valued and everyone is welcomed because everyone belongs*”.⁸ This call challenges us to build a community whose very mission is to share God’s wealth with all the people. Whenever we do this well, it is far from “boring” but rather a thing of beauty to be celebrated by all!

6) Taking a risk - Putting our spirituality into action

There is a dimension to our work that is so obvious that we may have the tendency to overlook it. In Bishop Scalabrini’s words it is referred to as “*Catholic Action*” or as we might call it today *the social transformation of society*. In 1896 in speaking on this very theme Scalabrini put it so clearly:

“It is not our purpose to engage in politics, as our adversaries would have people think. We wish above all to work for a moral rehabilitation, and to provide for the economic needs and the legitimate aspirations especially of the working class. The exploiters of the poor have made magnificent promises up until now, but they kept none of their promises. They have promised bread and justice, and today people lack justice and bread. Now it is our wish to organize, precisely for these people, helpful institutions, to expand mutual aid, favour the development of industry and commerce and develop the charitable works that are most suited for our time. (*Azione Cattolica* 1896).”⁹

Our mission demands us to put our spirituality into action even to the point of taking risks in favor of the migrants when the need arises. In gathering together the scattered children of God we will at times be in conflict with the mainline thinking of society (for example proposition 187 in California). Therefore we can no longer pretend that everyone, in every place and at every time will indeed welcome the stranger with wide open arms. Our spirit as Scalabrinians calls us to take the risk and denounce injustice against the migrant, no matter what the cost! To stand in solidarity with the migrant is at the core of our identity as Scalabrinians. In Matthew’s gospel story of the *feeding of the 5,000* (Matthew 14:13-21) we see Jesus and His disciples confronted by a tremendous dilemma:

“*what do we do with 5,000 hungry people?*”

The option of the disciples was a simple “we have nothing to give them, so send them home”. While on the other hand Jesus’ reaction was one of compassion and imagination to make the best of what he had (in this case 5 loaves and 2 fishes). When our mission brings us face to face with difficult situations our spirituality tells us:

1) Be compassionate, 2) Use your Imagination and 3) Trust in God.

At times of course this means taking the risk to share God’s wealth with all the people!

Conclusions

As I stated before the list of traits mentioned in this paper are not meant to be exhaustive but rather a collection of thoughts that seemed to have worked for me during the course of the last fifteen years. The list is not offered in any kind of sequential order of

⁸ Gonzalez, Sr. Maria Elena, *Parish Restructuring In Multicultural Communities*, (Newport, Rhode Island, April, 1995) in *Origins* May 4, 1995, pp. 781ff.

⁹ Francesconi, Mario, *The Spirituality of John Baptist Scalabrini*, (Center For Migration Studies, New York 1995 1995, p. 95.-

importance but it would seem to me that all six traits need to be operating on a regular basis if we are to be true to our call as Scalabrinian missionaries to the Migrants. Needless to say that for all these things to happen those involved must be patient and willing to organize a systematic plan of action which is open to ongoing reflection and evaluation. In the ideal world this reflection/evaluation process isn't just the work of the Scalabrinians themselves, but also part of the ongoing journey of being in community with those whom we are called to serve.

Each of the traits I have offered for your reflection begins with action words and rightfully so because spirituality demands action on our part - a "doing" as opposed to having something done "for you" or "to you"! Scalabrini called it *Spirituality Into Action* and I think that says it all. The Witnessing, the Telling, the Building, the Gathering, the Creating, the Risking offer us all concrete ways to put our spirituality into action and share God's wealth with all His people!

Reflection questions

1. To give witness by living in multicultural communities what must be changed (both personally & communally)?
2. What is the story of migration that you are called to tell?
3. What bridges of unity have you built in your mission / community?
4. Who are the lost sheep of your community? Do the "scattered children of God" have a place at your table?
5. What steps do I (we) have to take to create a greater sense of Scalabrinian mission where I (we) minister?
6. In what areas of your ministry do you see or feel the call to take the risk and put your spirituality into action?