

WORKSHEET 10 - SUPPLEMENTARY TEXTS

10. Christians are not so for themselves, but with Christ, for others

“The destiny, the deep intention of the Christian community is the world, ‘for women and men’ [Fr. Giussani says]: a profound and passionate dedication to women and men and their destinies, a striving to make present the Fact of Jesus Christ, the one salvation of the human person, within the fabric of normal shared living, in which people suffer, hope, strive, deny, and await the ultimate meaning of things” (Worksheet n. 10).

The witnesses of Benedetta and Bishop Tito Banchong from northern Laos offer us two examples of this “being for” the world, at a desk at school or in the jungles of Laos. Christ takes the yes we say today to, through us, reach all men and women.

The desire to put myself into play

About a month ago, we lost a very dear friend of ours, Mario, who passed away unexpectedly, leaving behind his wife and four kids. The pain caused by his death was immense, but, for me, the discovery this occasion allowed me to make—how true it is that reality is not against us and the nothing that happens is for our harm—was equally immense. My Greek teacher said this, “Tears purify our gaze,” and, in fact, after Marco passed away I couldn’t help but look at my father in a new way and recognize the fact that our relationship has improved a lot. Another thing that amazed me was seeing how much good could come out of something so tragic. The very day after his death, a huge group of our classmates gathered together in the chapel of a hospital, where a few of us go to pray the *Angelus* before the bell rings each morning. What really surprised me was the vast number of people there, including some who I don’t think have ever prayed before in their lives, like one guy in my class who declares he’s an atheist, but was there with all the others to show support for their religion teacher (Mario’s wife) and their classmate, Davide, who had just lost his father. These are just a few of the signs I saw, and there have been many others: for example, the desire I have to really put myself into play during religion class with our teacher as we discuss life after death, a topic that happened to be assigned to me and my group; seeing how much my friendships with the others in GS, including Davide, are growing and becoming more true; and recognizing how precious my faith is when, in speaking with one of my classmates, she said to me, “I would really like to have the faith you have, but in front of terrible things like this, the little faith I have always seems to fall short...I just get angry.” It’s strange how others see something in us that we don’t even recognize. I’ve always tried to be myself with my classmates, including showing them what I believe in, but as I failed miserably, I had given up. Instead, at that very moment, my classmate looks at me and tells me, “I would like to have your faith; you have many more certainties than I do.”

I don’t know why God chose Mario’s death as the way to make me discover all this; I don’t think that these signs could justify his death; or better, I know they can’t. But now the only thing for me to do is to give thanks for all of it, to give thanks because these events re-awakened in me the desire to live my life fully—just as Mario did, saying his “yes,” as Peter did—they reawakened my desire for the infinite.

Benedetta

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» The two bishops courageously seeking Catholics in the jungles of Laos*

After having met them, Francis told his close collaborators that he felt embarrassed: “They were the focus, I was on the periphery,” the Pontiff confided. “These bishops suffered continuing to joyfully testify to their faith, in tiny communities. At the end of the audience I felt... embarrassed.” Tito Banchong and Louis-Marie Ling are bishops in Laos, where they live in communities no one knows or speaks much about. Their story has a few things in common with that of the “hidden Christians” who lived in Japan several centuries ago, in the spotlight once again this week thanks to Martin Scorsese’s film “Silence.” [...]

Bishop Banchong is currently the leader of the community of the baptized in Luang Prabang, in northern Laos. In 2000, he went out door to door searching for the faithful. For 12 years, he was the only priest in an area that’s bigger than the entire “Meridionale” region of southern Italy. He found them “one by one,” the baptized who had survived after 25 years without churches, Sacraments or sacred images after the Communist movement Pathet Lao came to power in 1975. “They had kept the memory of the faith alive only in their hearts,” he tells us. Once they heard the news that a Catholic priest had returned to Luang Prabang, many came down from the mountains or traveled from remote villages to be blessed and profess the faith that remained intact in them. In 17 years of tireless pastoral work, carried out with humility and trust, the 69-year-old Banchong had reanimated the community—baptizing, visiting families and bringing the Gospel to tiny villages of the Hmong, Kamous and Akha tribes in the highlands.

Today he is the shepherd of the three thousand Catholics living out the faith in a context that’s predominantly Buddhist and Animist, marked by a Socialist bureaucracy that’s suffocated the people for years—the bishop had to ask permission for every little trip he took—and that over the last 15 years has finally seen a gradual lightening up of the pressure violating religious liberty. [...]

“God has always been with us, in this little corner of the world, even in the trials,” Banchong continues to repeat, his face joyful. The bishop is still excited after the meeting with Pope Francis: “He’s a merciful father to us.” He remembers the time he spent in prison between 1976 and 1986—a little over five years all together—like a “long spiritual retreat.” A time in which, though he couldn’t celebrate the Mass, “my body was the body of Christ and my blood was the blood of Christ.” The government had thrown out all of the foreign missionaries and the few Laotian priests there were had endured many groundless accusations from the Communist regime. After his first three years behind bars, the young Fr. Tito was condemned to an even worse sentence: to enroll in the army. “I kept vigil and prayed for an entire night, then I accepted becoming a soldier as God’s will,” he says. “I was in charge of food and provisions for the troops and could travel freely, thanks to the uniform. It was an opportunity to visit Christians and catechize without being disturbed,” he explains with a smile that betrayed an evangelical mix of cunning and candor. “Today I tell priests,” Banchong says, “do not be afraid. Do God’s will, and He will be active in this community and in our country.” [...]

Looking into their eyes and with their stories in mind, during the Mass at Santa Marta on January 30, Pope Francis said, “the greatest strength of the Church today is in the little Churches, tiny, with few people, persecuted, with their bishops in prison. This is our glory today, and our strength today.”

* A. Tornielli – P. Affatato, “The two bishops courageously seeking Catholics in the jungles of Laos”, *La Stampa*, 2 February 2017, pp. 1,15.