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“And they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb they told all these things to the eleven and to all the rest.” Luke 24:8

Women and mission (Instrumentum Laboris, B.2.3; Luke 11:15-28; Acts 16:13-15)

“Co-responsibility in Mission: towards a shared awareness of the meaning and content. How can we better share gifts and tasks in the service of the Gospel. B 2.3 How can the Church of our time better fulfil its mission through greater recognition and promotion of the baptismal dignity of women? It is not a question of promotion and recognition in the worldly sense, of rights and desires, but of the well-being of the Church. In fidelity to the Origin, who is Jesus, His style, His words, His silences, His choices.”

The Gospel is inspiring: in these days of the Synod too, beginning first and foremost with the Eucharist. Celebrating in faith is the generative womb of every reform in the Church. And so, today's reading (inseparable from tomorrow's), at a critical point in Jesus' communication with the crowd, in the midst of the conflict of interpretations, introduces - interwoven with Jesus' words - (“as Jesus said these things, ...”), the cry of a woman. The cry of a woman from the crowd who is touched by Jesus' revelation is disruptive and inspired - because she does not know, perhaps using a popular saying, that she is proclaiming the “beatitude of the womb.” It corresponds admirably to the blessing proclaimed at the beginning of the Gospel by another woman, also in response to the sign picked up from the womb (Lk 1:45: “Blessed is the fruit of your womb...!”), “Blessed is the womb...!” she says. The anonymous woman in the crowd senses that in that man, the Rabbi of Nazareth who makes the one who was possessed by a mute demon speak, that the generation of all life is at stake. She intuits the original mystery of generation that is revealed in him. She perceives, she cries out, but she does not know what to say, and so implicitly invokes what prompted her intuition.

And, picking up on her visceral intuition, Jesus develops it by transforming it and decoding its irruption, thus resolving the conflict of interpretations that were besieging him. He develops what is only a cry, questioning astonishment: in the humanity of Jesus, God speaks, and that human person generated from the womb is involved in his mystery.

“It is not flesh or blood” (cf. Mt 16:17; cf. Lk 8:21), he had already told Simon – to another cry of faith. Without refuting the woman of the people, he corrects her, deriving the truth and thus silencing the insinuation of his adversaries: to him, beatitude is found in listening, welcoming, and creativity. To listen, to understand, to give flesh to the Word: the Word that was generated in the beginning.

Thus, the lightning-quick dialogue between Jesus and the anonymous woman in the crowd is full of symbolic, inspiring power. And, from there, from this humble prophetic voice – welcomed and deconstructed, or rather re-expressed – Jesus can resume his painful journey to Jerusalem, amidst insidious suspicions and the wonder of the little ones.

It is somewhat similar to what happened at Cana, with the cry of the mother which Jesus questions and transforms: “They have no wine” (or with the Samaritan woman, or with the Canaanite woman, or with Mary of Magdala).

This Gospel, from its luminous margins, powerfully evangelises the questioning gathering of this Synod on the theme of mission and how to recognise different expressions of ministries. That anonymous woman's cry, in its humility, exorcises verbalism and proceduralism. It raises fruitful questions and clears the way: “Those who hears the Word and keep it.”

And light, in a convergent sense, seems to me to come if we compare this Gospel reading with the account of that critical passage of the apostolic church (Acts 16) in which, in the disorientation of the missionaries' plans, traversed by the irruption of the Spirit, the Gospel enters Europe. And it opens the mission to unprecedented fruitfulness, thanks to the humble, generative contribution of women. Are they merely extras? No, simply "grasped by the Word," they open unseen spaces to the Gospel.

The Council of Jerusalem had just taken place (Acts 15), the ways of the Gospel began to radiate beyond the land of Israel, not without encountering obstacles on the path. Immediately, following the first missionary journey, bitter disagreements arose between Paul and Barnabas, though they were close friends. A controversial discernment over the presence of young Mark led to a parting of their ways (Acts 15:36-40). We must imagine a process of struggling to understand. Difference - even to the point of conflict - however necessary and fruitful in the Church, nevertheless differs from quarrelsome and poisoned contention, because it never demonises the opponent, but makes room for him. Having separated paths, Paul and his co-workers [1] later face unforeseen obstacles or rather, as the book of Acts expresses it, "the Holy Spirit forbade them to proclaim the word in Asia" (Acts 16:6). Pope Francis reminded us in the opening homily of this Synodal Assembly, "So many missionary plans that end up in what appear to be blind alleys are in reality the crisis that opens new visions of Church."

At Troas, a port, the point of departure to reach Europe, Paul has a vision: a Macedonian who pleads with him, saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." The pagan's cry hijacks and converts Paul's plans. This is not the first time this change of itinerary is caused by a Breath from above. The dream, the passivity and restlessness of the dream, of the startling vision, opens totally new vistas. It leads to conflicts, it opens horizons. Thus begins the second missionary journey - starting from disorienting premises.

And so, the Church arrives in Europe, and it does so in a surprising, new form: starting from the margins, from the banks of the river, just outside a wealthy Roman city. "Women had gathered there for prayer." Strangely, Paul was welcomed by a liturgy outside the ritual, among women, in the open air. The apostle did not start here, as was his custom, in the synagogue (one probably did not exist in Philippi, a Roman colony). He inserted himself into a "non ritual" female liturgy, breaking into it with the word of the Gospel.

As on Easter morning, so too this beginning/threshold is without men. The apostle is preceded, and welcomed, by the unusual *koinonia* of women praying, under the open sky. Here Paul approaches, with his passion for the Gospel.

Thus began the course of the Gospel in Europe. In Philippi, mission emerged from a well-defined territory, and found new spaces. New languages inaugurated by women, whom Paul does not disdain, whom he rather gathered as a *kairos*: he preached to them, entered into dialogue. Lydia, humble worshipper of God and a seller of purple cloth, would become the first believer in the land of Europe.

Lydia is identified by her essence as a "hearer" of the Word, in dialogical, free and creative docility. she keeps the Word by seeking recognition from the apostle, offering hospitality: "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come": a splendid inclusiveness of gifts that generates the Church. The apostle's power of discernment before the simple openness of a heart opens new vistas for mission.

And so, Lydia offers her home to the apostles, "prevailing on" them to accept (16:15). On this threshold, the Church in Europe is born, through a gesture that emerges as a way of putting into practice the faith ("if you have judged me to be a believer"), and offers the space of her *domus* ("come to my house and stay").

Lydia's house is thus redefined by the irruption of the Gospel. As Jesus had done and commanded: whatever city you enter, find a home (cf. Mt 10:11). Space constructed by bonds rather than walls. The basic ecclesial space, the "*domus*" that today powerfully begs to be rediscovered and articulated in new languages, according to its original wisdom.

The birth of a church in Europe evokes the original story. It recalls the novelty – how much is this grasped and understood today? – inaugurated by Jesus with those women who followed him, supporting his ministry out of their means (it is Luke again who tells us this: Lk 8:1-3): all the way to the cross, to the open tomb, and to the garden. On the third day...

The movement originated by the Gospel, and the soul of every true synodal journey, generates new, generative relationships. And the contribution of women, who are extremely diverse among themselves, (the woman of the people, the businesswoman of Cyrene...), unceasingly fuels the spiritual dynamism of reform, when the pattern becomes inadequate to the mystery it conveys. Vatican II inaugurated a reform movement that has been interrupted.

In the light of the Beginnings, Jesus' style – that seems to comprehend that women are dynamic elements of mission, like a presence that in critical, disruptive, unsettling passages - senses the movement of life, weaves new, improbable relationships, patiently brings and dissolves conflicts. It is not a question of rights but of gifts received.

For mission, therefore, there are different *diakonias*. In each case, an "outgoing" synodal Church, in the beginning as today, immediately encounters the presence of women, various and diverse women, not to be homologated - to be discerned ("if you have judged me to be..."), certainly, and to be integrated based on the particularity of each one. This is the evidence of the Word. The element inscribed in generative roots, as a constitutive trait of evangelical newness, disregarded for centuries. Jesus was innovative, he created a daring and revelatory style, in his way of relating to women, but this peculiarity finds provocative validation in the current climate. Today we find ourselves in the concrete situation of realising that this relates to us – it relates to the Church that seeks reform.

To go forth and proclaim the coming of the Kingdom, Jesus says "the home" is indispensable in his discourses on the mission (Lk 10:5-8; Mt 10:11-14). It is understood as a place of reliable, nurturing bonds. A place of prayer, on the margins.

Thus, when the Council in outlining the missionary Church states, "...the contemplative life belongs to the fullness of the Church's presence" (*Ad Gentes*, 18), does this not echo this same trait, does it not outline unprecedented ministries?

Let us ask ourselves where this constitutive trait in Gospel novelty related to Jesus' style has ended up today, given the first proclamation of the resurrection to the apostles was entrusted to a woman. And the first Christian community, with the company of the Apostles has Mary, his Mother, at its center.

This question begs to be asked: how does Jesus' style – certainly in a radically changed cultural, anthropological, and social context – connote mission, in a global culture that seems to be losing its contours, roots, and differences? In particular, how does it ferment, with the generative power of inclusive relationships, and its places, its language of celebration, and of the outbound Church?

The beginning of the evangelising mission in Europe offers food for thought.

And to those whose hearts are sensitive to his visitation, the Spirit unveils ways and languages to give him flesh.

[1] Here, among other things, the Acts narrative (16:10) begins to be offered in the first-person plural, to the "we," with which Luke enters on tiptoe as the lead narrator (already in Acts 11:27). This change of narrative point of view, with which Luke enters Europe alongside the Apostle, gives greater emphasis on the "synodal" character of the second missionary journey – "never without the other."