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The Challenge of Faith Today

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PASQUALE GIORDANO, S.J.

This past October, during the inter-term recess, the Philippine Province of the Society of Jesus ran a conscientization program for about 35 Jesuits. This program was part of the effort of the Province to implement its thrust for justice, a thrust very strong in the Church today. The conscientization program was geared for awakening, awakening us to the realities of life, especially life among the poor and the oppressed. We were divided into three groups. One group went to the mountains of Bukidnon in Mindanao to experience the life of the people there. The Jesuits who went there lived with the Jesuits who run the mission parishes in Bukidnon under the dynamic leadership of Bishop Francisco Claver, a Jesuit Bishop. A second group went to Negros to experience the life of the sugar workers. The Jesuits who went there came back very aware of the plight of the sugar workers and the oppression of the system there. A third group of which I was a member went to Tondo, to experience the life of the urban poor, in particular, the squatters of the North Harbor. In a land area roughly equal in size to the campus of the Ateneo de Manila, there are about 200,000 people struggling to live. Most of them come from the southern provinces. They come to Manila to get jobs. Most of their jobs are on the piers or in Divisoria, so living in Tondo is very convenient for them, putting them very near their source of work.

It was quite an interesting experience for us. We lived in one room of the community center of Slip Zero, near the San Miguel glass factory, all seven of us. It was very difficult for us to adapt to the living conditions, very difficult. Yet, somehow we managed. We broke up into three groups: one group worked in

Zoto, where there is a very active community organization; another group went to Barrio Magsaysay to see the situation there, and the third group of which I was a member went to Magsaysay Village where the P.I.M.E. fathers, an Italian missionary Institute, have a parish.

Here I saw the Church more alive than I have seen it in many other places. Amidst the poverty, the disease, and the filth I saw a vibrant community centered around the Church, struggling against many difficulties both within and without. Here I saw a living Church; here I came to understand more fully what I have committed myself to; here I came to see the face of Jesus Christ redeeming the hearts of God's people. There are many difficulties there yet, but something is happening. When the fathers first went there, there was only apathy and indifference. Before martial law there was on the average one murder a week, with intense block rivalry. At first, the people tried to get all they could off the fathers, playing on their sympathies. Hardly anyone came to Mass. But gradually trust was built up, things started happening. The fathers became very much a part of the people's life, and the dynamic of involvement and concern started to grow. Now, the liturgy there on a Sunday is one of the finest I have experienced either here or in the States. The people sing out full throated, participate fully, and have truly become a worshipping community sharing their common difficulties and common struggles.

I bring up the example of my experiences in Magsaysay Village because I want to make clear that for the Christian faith to be realized today, it must be realized in a living community, and this is what the Church is, or is supposed to be. But, isn't this precisely the problem, the lack of a living community. Because there is this lack of a living community, there is a weakening of our faith.

We all know how difficult community is to achieve. Even those of us who are in religious life where our very existence is community centered know how difficult it is to form a good community. There are so many things in our human nature that work against community. There is a real alienation in our lives.

This alienation, this split, is threefold: an alienation within ourselves, an alienation between ourselves and others, and an alienation between ourselves and God. This alienation is so much a part of our human condition. We are a mystery to ourselves. There are areas of light and darkness in our lives. Many times, we are cut off from others by a wall of silence that cuts off effective community. We are separated from God by a gulf that seems unsurmountable. This is our human condition. Yet, this is the condition that God entered into and became, in order to shatter the alienation, and to bring us to a wholeness and integration. I firmly believe that the key to shattering this alienation, the key to finding ourselves, the key to finding meaning in our lives, is our response to this God-man, this Jesus Christ. This response we call faith.

Any response is a response to some sort of invitation. How are we to experience this invitation? How are we to experience God? Being human beings, the experience of God for us will always be mediated by some kind of finite reality. For the early Church this finite experience was the experience of the historical Jesus. In Jesus was the fullness of God's revelation. As St. John says in the opening of his Gospel, "No one has ever seen God: it is the only Son, who is nearest the Father's heart, who has made Him known." (Jn 1:18) People came to see the divinity of Jesus because of who and what He was. This became especially clear after the Resurrection, when the early Church looked back over the life of Jesus in the light of the Resurrection.

But Jesus is not present today in the same way that He was present when He walked the face of the earth. He is present through His Spirit permeating the Church, permeating each one of us who profess faith in Him. He is present in the Church, the people of God, you and me. The Church is this community of believers in the Lordship of Jesus Christ, committed to carrying out His mission, to make man one, one with the Father, and one with each other. You see, the word community is very important in this definition. The Church is a community geared to form community.

So, our religious experience is a celebration of communion.

It is a communal activity in which we express our joyful awareness of being in community and in friendship with one another and with God.

Something that is never stressed enough is the realization that the Christian experience of God is a Trinitarian experience. God Himself is community. This is what we mean when we say God is love. If the inner life of God is the love between persons in the Trinity then we can say something about human life inasmuch as it can share in the divine life. Since, the divine life is the interpersonal love among the Trinity, this becomes present in the world whenever these relationships become incarnate in human relationships. This is what the Church must be about, the building of community so that men may experience this love among themselves and with God. Let me emphasize once again that to have a living faith, we need a living community, a true community where this interpersonal love is possible.

Faith is our personal response to a personal God revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. Faith is our response to God's invitation; faith is our response to a person, Jesus Christ. In responding to Jesus we must be careful we are not responding to projections we cast upon the figure of Jesus. The needs we have which I think are an important part of our response, these needs which make possible and necessary the response, must not be identified with the person we make the response to. Our desires should not be projected upon the figure of Jesus and become personified in Him. Faith must have support in the historical Jesus Himself. Faith must spring from the perception of historical facts. If we are supposed to speak about the foundation of our faith in Him, then, the one about whom we speak can only be Jesus of Nazareth. We know that Jesus not only lived in the past but that as the risen and exalted Lord, He is alive today.

In talking about faith, I would like to characterize it by these five characteristics:

1. faith is personal;
2. faith comes to us through the community;
3. faith is dynamic;

4. faith is a risk; and
5. faith is demanding.

Let me explain each of these five aspects now:

First, faith is personal. It is an act that only we can make for ourselves. No one can make it for us. It must be made in freedom. It involves everything that we are; it commits our whole person.

The longer I live, the more I realize that self-interest is the motivating principle of most of our actions. We only respond to something if we see a good in it for us. Notice I say self-interest, not selfishness. There is an enormous difference between them.

I have done some community organizing in Chicago with Alinsky-style neighborhood organizations. The cardinal principle of the community organizer is that people only act out of self-interest. I found that to be true. You come into a neighborhood of apathy and despair, and you try to see what you can do to help the people form a community. The first thing you have to do is to find out what is bothering them, what are their problems, what do they want to get done. That is a difficult process to get started. Most people would rather remain in their apathy than do something about the problems that are affecting their lives. So, you go around, talking to the people until finally you find some people who identify the problems and want to do something about them. Usually, the problem is something that affects them personally, then, not someone else. Because it affects them, they are willing to do something about it. It might be something like the garbage in their neighborhood not being collected. So, you organize a group of people, go down to the Sanitation Department and ask them to collect the garbage. They say, "Yes". You go back home, and you find nothing is done. The next time you go down to the Sanitation Department with a group twice as large, and you ask a little louder and stronger. The next day the garbage is collected. The people have achieved a victory. Something happens in the process, they gain a certain self-confidence. With this self-confidence they have grown, they now become concerned about things which not only affect them personally but also affect others in the

neighborhood and are willing to act upon it. It is a beautiful experience to see a people grow from apathy to involvement and concern. It is a beautiful thing to see leaders develop, to gradually give themselves more and more to the people in service.

Let me give another example of people gaining strength from their community involvement. Last November 17, demolition teams from the City Engineer's Office came to demolish some of the homes of the squatters in Bonifacio Village in Tondo. Usually there is an advance notice given, and there is a permit allowing for the demolition. In this case, however there were neither of these two things. The people were very distressed as they saw their homes being destroyed. What could they do? What recourse did they have? They telegraphed President Marcos, and then they decided to go see him in person to present their difficulties to him. So, eight hundred people, men, women, and children, started walking to Malacañang Palace through the streets of Manila. When they reached the Quezon Bridge they were stopped by the MetroCom, who told them that only their leaders could continue on to Malacañang. So, several of their leaders came forward to go to Malacañang. However, instead of bringing them to Malacañang, the MetroCom brought them to Camp Crame. Here they were questioned by General Olivas, the head of MetroCom. He told them, didn't you know that there could be no rallies and marches during martial law. They said, they know that, but all they were doing was to go to see President Marcos to tell him about their grievances because their homes were being destroyed. The demolition teams came from the City Engineer's Office to destroy their homes with no permit and with no advance notice. What could they do? Then they showed General Olivas a letter from President Marcos who had promised them that their homes in Bonifacio Village would not be destroyed until the Navotas Area was reclaimed, and then they could move there. General Olivas heard all this. Then, he called in the people from the City Engineer's Office, reprimanded them, ordered that the demolition be stopped, and released the leaders of Zoto. These leaders returned to the

community as heroes. Just think what it meant to them to achieve this victory, to be listened to. Just think the strength it gave them, helping make them better able to give to others, to serve.

Let me make an analogy between the community organizing experience and our personal response in faith. We turn to Jesus Christ because we realize we need Him. We must look on Jesus not only as Lord but as Savior also. There comes a time in our lives when we realize we need Him. Unless we come to this realization, we will never turn to Him. Read the Gospels and you will find how many people turned to Jesus because they needed help, and He was the one who could provide it. Their need made possible their faith. Many times, such an incident winds up with the person leaving all and following Jesus telling others what Jesus has done for him. The same thing is true for us. To turn to Jesus we must experience the need for salvation, the need for life. Salvation is offering life to a person in the sense that he doesn't have it now. John 10:10: "I have come so that they may have life and have it to the full." John 17:3: "And eternal life is this: to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."

So we cry out for help and place and our trust in Jesus. In Him is salvation. In Him we see what it means to be fully human, to be in the image of God. When this becomes clear to us in our lives, then we respond. Some people would scoff at this and say that this is just a response of weakness. Religion is a crutch, a real man does not need to invent a God to cover up his weaknesses and insufficiencies.

Well, each of us has to answer this for ourselves. It all depends how you look on man and the human condition. I see man as integrally ordered to God. There is a dynamic drive towards the infinite within him, a drive towards greater love and knowledge which can never be satisfied by anything else. Unless man acts on this he can never become himself.

Jesus, the God-man, has shown us what it is to be truly human. We can never become fully human unless we come to grips with the mystery of God's presence in our lives. We come

to God because we realize we need Him. Unless we come to this realization we will never make this leap of faith.

Something happens to us in the process. We are transformed. From an initial motive of self-interest and need, our motives become purified and deepened. Love transforms us. It does something to our very being. The only response to love is a response of love. The more we experience God's love, the more we love in return. The deeper we respond to God's invitation in our lives, the more we realize that our life consists in giving. Our self-interest now lies in the giving of ourselves. Unless we do this, we are destroyed.

I think we have all met selfish people. All they do is try to take. They hurt other people not because they want to, but because they are unable to give to others. They are unable to give because they have nothing to give; they are empty inside. No matter how much they try to fill up that emptiness by taking, they can never fill it up because this kind of emptiness can never be filled by the person who is empty, taking, it can only be filled by others giving. What a tremendous gift it is to have received love from others. Because unless we are loved by others, we can not love ourselves, and unless we love ourselves, we can not love others.

This leads us to the second point I want to make about faith: faith comes to us through the community. In fact the personal dimension and the communal dimension are integrally related to each other. Neither can exist without the other. All our personal decisions are affected by the influence of the community upon us. We all affect each other more than we realize, for good and for bad. Even though the decisions for faith can only be made in the inner recesses of an individual's heart, the possibilities for that decision are mediated by the community.

When a young baby is baptized, the young baby is not making the decision of faith for itself, but it is the parents who are taking upon themselves the responsibility of bringing the child up in the faith. The faith is passed on to the child through the basic unit of society which is the family. Here is, I believe, the critical spot where the faith must be passed on. If there is a

living faith in the family, this will be passed on to the child. If there is not a living faith in the family, then it will be very difficult for the child to believe. As a teacher of religion in high school and now of theology in college, I have found that you bring a student a long way if they come from a family with a strong living faith. If they do not come from such a situation, then it is very difficult to come through with a religious message.

You know when a child is born; he is born with his eyes closed. He is born like he is blind. Gradually as he grows his eyes open to the reality around him. He sees more and more. What he sees affects him very much. The family is the unity that determines what he first sees and how he sees it. Not only do the parents give their child life and help it to grow strong by caring for it with love and concern, but the parents also affect how their child will develop in his relationship with God. The influence of the parents on the first years of the life of the child is enormous. The responsibilities are enormous. How a child is loved in those early years will affect his whole life. A study of orphans showed that deprived of the loving care of a mother they were less capable of loving when they grew up in comparison to those children who received the warmth and care of a loving mother.

However, even though the early years and influences are very important, there comes a time, when a crisis occurs, when doubt begins to occur. For all of us the time comes in our lives when we question everything that has been given to us and search for what is really ours. This period is called the crisis of faith. You know I teach five sections of college freshman theology, that is about 180 students. Recently I gave them a questionnaire on religious and moral values. It was interesting to note that almost all of the students have undergone a crisis of faith, when they reacted against almost all of the religious beliefs which they were taught in their upbringing. For a few it occurred in grade school, for a few in college but for over 90% it occurred in high school. I think it is part of the developmental process that just as an adolescent rebels against much of what he has received as a child, so too he questions and rebels what was taught to him

about his religion, especially if it was forced upon him by his parents or in grade school. Now that he is old enough to be on his own, he is not going to have any more of this kid stuff. I know I went through this period and I am sure that many of you did also. It brought me to a deeper faith. So we should be understanding of our children and our students who are going through this now. When you go through this period, there are three possible responses: one is to come to a deep authentic faith; another is to totally reject the faith, and the third is to be lukewarm, to not even come to grips with the problems. I think too many of us are in this third category. We fail to come to grips with the challenge. We may even still continue to go to Mass and say that we are Catholic, yet it is not a deep, personal faith. It is just superficial. This are the people Jesus said that He would spit out of his mouth, for they are neither hot nor cold. At least there is an honesty in the person who rejects his faith. He is not a hypocrite.

It is at a time like this, a time of a crisis of faith, that the influence of others upon us can be very strong. All of us have experienced times in our lives when we needed help in some way or another. Maybe, someone was there, to love us, to understand us, to offer consolation, to give us encouragement. These people have helped us. They have loved us. God's love has been mediated through them. To have been loved is to have experienced God's grace. God's grace is not such a mysterious thing. It is very much a part of our lives. Very often, it works through the people around us. God's grace and God's gifts are such that they cannot just remain with us, but must pass on from us to others if they are to live in us. If it just remained in us, it would die, and so would we, but if it passes on from us to others, it will grow even more in our own lives.

We believe because we make the personal act of faith, but we are able to make this act only because of those around us who affect our lives, who themselves believe, and who because of their influence on our lives help us to believe. To live in the midst of a believing community is to give tremendous support and strength to the individual in his own life of faith.

Jesus Christ walked the face of the earth 2000 years ago. He now has no natural contact with it. His contact is now through us, those who have professed faith in Him and who live committed to His Word. Through us, the hand of Christ reaches out and touches others. Our lives are interconnected. We come to God as a community as a people, not by ourselves. Thus, the community has a tremendous influence upon our making the act of faith.

Third, not only is faith personal and comes to us through the community, but faith is dynamic. It is not static, not stationary, but dynamic, constantly growing. It is always on the move. Just as the life of the body is dynamic, constantly growing, and once it stops growing, it begins to die, so too is our life of faith. We cannot stand still because if we do, our life of faith would begin to die. There is a constant invitation by God inviting us through the people and events of our life to a deeper union with him, and whether we respond or not affects the dynamism of our faith.

I have always been impressed with Dag Hammarskjold, the former Secretary General of the United Nations, who was killed in a plane crash while trying to settle the crisis in the Belgian Congo. There was a depth about his person, an air about him which revealed a strength and struggle within. I came across a quote from his book, *Markings*, which gave me an insight to what was within: "I don't know Who ... or what ... put the question; I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did say YES to Someone ... or something ... and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful, and that, therefore, my life, in self surrender, had a goal."

He said yes to someone or something, and in that yes found meaning in his life. Yet, once he said that yes I am sure he had to continually reaffirm it, and bring it to a deeper level. Because when we say yes we do not say it once for ever, we must repeat that yes continually. The more we respond, the more that is demanded of us. Gradually there is a liberation process taking place that frees us from the many things that keep us from

truly being ourselves, and gradually we get transformed through activity and response to realize more fully that our life can only have meaning if it is lived for others.

So, our faith is dynamic. To believe now does not mean we will always believe. An important thing to realize is the way we live affects our faith, and our faith affects the way we live. There is an integral relationship between them.

Fourth, faith is a risk. We never completely know for sure. There is always an element of doubt. Somehow, this makes tremendous sense to me. How sure can we be of anything in life? We are overawed with the mystery of life, especially by the mystery of God's presence. Because our religious response of faith is clothed in mystery, there is always the element of doubt. So, there is a risk in living our lives according to our faith.

If we can never be completely sure, what then can we base our life of faith on? Is there anything we can base our life of faith on? There is, and that is our own personal experience. Our personal experience of God in our lives is real enough for us to base our lives on. It is a mysterious thing but still very real, real enough for us to base our lives on. You know that our experience of God is such that it is very real for us, very meaningful in our lives. However, even though we are talking about something very personal here, we must bring in the communal aspect here. Our experience must be tested by the community, shared with the community. Unless this is so, we could be possibly fooled by our aberrations. The community is a sounding board for our religious experience, and our religious experiences are a valuable input for the community, giving it life. The gifts we receive from God are not for us but for the benefit of the community.

So, risk is very much a part of our life of faith, but then, isn't risk so much a part of life. It is risk that makes life exciting and livable. What a joy it is to be free and liberated from the constraining limits of fear and weakness to be able to be open to the Spirit so that we may be blown like a leaf high in air to float to so many exciting places.

Risk enters into so many parts of our lives. Take marriage for

instance. There is a great risk in two people saying "Yes" to each other for life. If that "Yes" is lived in fidelity and commitment that life together can be very beautiful despite the hardships. But if there is no fidelity and commitment, then, that life together can be a living hell.

If this is true for marriage, it is also true for other aspects of life, especially the life of faith. Take the religious life, which above all things is a life of faith. If lived in fidelity and commitment, it is very exciting and beautiful despite the hardships, but a life of faith, the religious life, lived without fidelity and commitment is a fraud, a wasted life. "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trodden under foot by men." (Mt 5:13)

This leads us to our fifth and final aspect of faith which sums up the previous four aspects of faith: its being personal, coming to us through the community, its being dynamic, and its being a risk. This is: Faith is demanding. Faith is a call to action. If God is trying to establish His Kingdom here on earth, then the Christian faith is a response to this call. The Constitution of the Church in the Modern World of the Second Vatican Council says that faith itself involves responsibilities to the world we live in. By furthering the natural processes, we are furthering the supernatural processes. By dedicating oneself to the earthly service of man, the Christian is preparing man for the heavenly kingdom.

The recent documents of the Church are filled with the concern for justice and peace. However, we all know there is a big split in the Church between what is said and the actuality which really exists. Why is there such a big split between theory and practice, between what is said and what is done. Well, this is the human element in the Church, but let us begin with ourselves. The real failure lies in us. Unless flesh and blood is put on the words and theories, the statements for justice and peace, these statements are empty and useless. The challenge is open to us. The Church can show the plausibility of its claims only by making it real in the world. Only by living the truth, can the

Church tell man precisely what it is preaching. For the Church action and doing are essential.

If the act of faith is a call to action, then faith cannot stand alone, it must stand together with love and hope. Faith, love, and hope are three aspects of one act in responding to God.

Life comes to man by faith. This new life is associated with love. If the Christian community loves one another, they know God. As St. John says: "My dear people, let us love one another since love comes from God and everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God. Anyone who fails to love can never have known God, because God is love." (1 John 4:7-8) "No one has ever seen God; but as long as we love one another, God will live in us and his love will be complete in us." (1 John 4:12) I think he who loves the most, sees God the clearest.

But besides involving love, faith also involves hope. The basis of our hope lies in the Resurrection. As St. Paul says if Christ be not risen then our faith is in vain. But if Jesus did rise from the dead then our faith is real. The resurrection is not purely a past event; it also has to be seen as a future event. Just as Jesus has come to the glory of the resurrection because He was true to His mission; so too do we look forward to our resurrection, our coming to the Father.

However, just as Jesus did not come to the glory of the resurrection without passing through the suffering of the passion, so too, we who follow in His footsteps, we who have been baptized into His life, and now live our lives committed to Him, must follow the same path, and this path involves suffering. For only in doing so will we be able to transform this world we live in. That is the way Jesus did it. If we are to do so, we must get involved in the struggle for making life more human, the struggle for liberation, the struggle to establish justice and peace here on earth. This has been the history of the Church. St. Augustine says that the Church is most herself when she is suffering. There is a lot of truth in that statement.

I find a lot of truth in this. That is why I strongly believe that if the Church is to truly manifest God's presence in the world, to truly proclaim God's Word, the Church must become

credible. The Church must associate more with the poor and oppressed, the Church must get her hands dirty. Then the sign that she is, will be very clear for all to see. Then, we will more clearly know to what and to whom we have committed ourselves.

I mention the parish church of San Pablo Apostol in Magsaysay Village in Tondo, because that is one of the places that I personally have seen the Church suffering with the poor and oppressed, the Church forming a community, the Church getting her hands dirty. Because of this, the Church speaks clearly there. This was only done by hard work over a long period of time. Yet I think in some respects it was easier there because the people had nothing, and because of this did not have the barriers to community that we have. Our possessions keep us from each other. They give us a false sense of security. They have nothing, yet they really have everything because they have each other. We should not let our possessions keep us from each other. We need each other, more than we realize. We have walls around our homes preventing community, keeping others away. We have walls around ourselves, keeping ourselves from the life that only others can give us. We think we are sufficient in ourselves so we do not reach out to others. Yet, we find an emptiness in this. The people of Magsaysay Village have no walls around their homes. Some have no walls around their homes. Some have no walls around their persons. Some have realized how much their lives depend on others.

As Christians we must be about building community, responding to the situation we live in, trying to create a just and peaceful society, and the world being what it is, and our human situation being what it is, this will involve suffering. But in that suffering, in that very struggle, we will possess God. It is in the very struggle that God is most real. It is in a life of struggle that faith, love, and hope become most real.

This is the challenge to our Faith today, the challenge to create a living community in the midst of all sorts of obstacles, amidst all sort of separations and alienations: within us, between ourselves and others, and between ourselves and God.

It is being done in Magsaysay Village in Tondo amidst tremendous difficulties. The faith is real there because the struggle is there. Can a living community be built here at the Ateneo, in your family, in your parish, in your neighborhood.

The challenge lies before us. This is what we are called to do as Christians. This is the challenge to our Faith today.