

FROM THE SERVANT GENERAL
LESSONS FROM LAMENTATIONS
(Part 3)

THE POOR AND THE PURE

Our mission is to proclaim the full gospel of Jesus, with its spiritual and social dimensions. Our basic mission is evangelization. An important collateral work is our so-called work with the poor. One of our core values is “Living a preferential option for the poor.” We participate in building the Church of the Poor. In this, aside from bringing people to Christ, we also look to their material needs.

Because of widespread poverty throughout the world, because of such patent injustice to the greater majority of people, this work with the poor is urgent and crucial. Our love for Jesus and transformation in Christ should lead us to love our neighbor, especially the least among them. If we have faith but not works, then such faith is dead (Jas 2:14-17).

But here lies a danger. It is to get so involved in helping the poor materially that we miss out on the more important aspect of helping them spiritually. Those who embraced the theology of liberation ended up going the way of violence in order to fight poverty and injustice. In our own work, some of those who were doing the wonderful work of GK ended up marginalizing Christ, partnering with those who violated Catholic values (such as pharmaceuticals with contraceptives), and even bringing New Age into the work.

The Lord did warn us about such veering away. At the center of our covenant is Jesus, and anytime we stray away from that, we will be in deep trouble.

The reflection last April 2, 2007, in “40 Days of Lamentations,” the readings of which are also the readings for today, is very relevant. It is worth revisiting, as we now do.

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Day 35

Jesus at the Center of our Covenant

*“The Lord is my light and my salvation”
(Psalm 27:1a)*

April 2
Isaiah 42:1-7
Psalm 27:1-14
John 12:1-11

Isaiah 42:1-7 is the first of four “Servant of the Lord” oracles in Isaiah. These prophecies find their fulfillment in Jesus Christ. This passage also teaches us about the purpose of our covenant, sealed by the blood of Jesus on the cross. Jesus is the center and

focal point of our covenant. “I formed you, and set you as a covenant of the people” (Is 42:6).

Jesus and his relationship with the Father is our model in our own relationship of covenant with God. Just like Jesus, those whom God calls into covenant are those who are chosen to be His Spirit-filled servants, who become pleasing to Him and who are sent to renew the world according to His ways. “Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one with whom I am pleased, upon whom I have put my spirit; he shall bring forth justice to the nations” (Is 42:1).

Jesus’ work is to bring justice to the world (Is 42:1,4,6). Justice in biblical usage is about righteousness and about giving every person what is their due. To God is due worship. To every person is due recognition as having dignity as children of God. To the poor is due an equitable share of the world’s goods. In other words, Jesus’ mission is to establish the kingdom of God as God intended for it to be. It is a restoration of paradise. Of course the fullness of that restoration will only be fulfilled in the new Jerusalem at the end of time.

For us, as part of our covenant and in living out our vocation to be God’s people, and in following the way of Christ, we are to be “a light for the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, to bring out prisoners from confinement, and from the dungeon, those who live in darkness” (Is 42:6-7). This is our work of global evangelization, proclaiming the good news in its fullness, including its spiritual and social dimensions. Through this work, the sorry situation of people in the world will be reversed—the blind shall see, the prisoners will be freed, and those in darkness will see the light. This work is all about salvation and liberation.

That is quite a task. It is the work of God Himself. The powerful enemy will certainly oppose it. There will be hardships, trials, oppressions, persecutions, pain, crosses. We need to be able to persevere. We need to carry on in spite of seeming defeats. We need to depend on strength that is beyond our own. We need to place our hope in God.

Psalm 27 gives the reason why we hope in God (our theme this year from Lamentations 3:24). The essence of our hope is our trust in God. Why do we trust God?

Because He is our light, our salvation and our life’s refuge (Ps 27:1).

Because He will deliver us in time of trouble and from our enemies (Ps 27:5-6).

Because His love for us surpasses even the love of our own parents (Ps 27:10).

Now if we trust God, then we must not be afraid. In fact, fear and trust are opposites. “Though an army encamp against me, my heart does not *fear*; though war be waged against me, even then do I *trust*.” (Ps 27:3).

We can carry on, whatever the circumstances in our life and in our work. We do so because God called us to this work, God gave us the privilege of our covenant, and God assures us that He will always be there for us. God will show us the way, God will not abandon us to the will of those who oppose us and His work, and on top of everything else, we shall enjoy the Lord’s goodness in the land of the living (Ps 27:11-13). There is nothing else then that we need.

Now in doing our work of liberation, there is one critical point. For us to enjoy all the blessings of covenant, for us to truly have hope, we must always be focused on Jesus.

Again Jesus is the center and focal point of our covenant. Because of this, it is critically important for us to realize that Jesus is the one priority before everything else, including the mission he gives us to do.

Jesus' mission is to bring glad tidings to the poor. That is our mission as well. But when Judas was complaining why Mary used costly perfumed oil to anoint Jesus' feet rather than selling it and giving the money to the poor, Jesus said, "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." (Jn 12:8). Here they had a choice: to sell the oil and give the money to the poor, or to honor Jesus by anointing his feet with it. Jesus' words make the choice clear to us. We must first and foremost be focused on him, giving him the honor, praise and worship that is his due. Then, if we are truly focused on him, if we are living our lives in him, we will certainly go forth and help the poor. Indeed, it is Jesus himself who sends us out on such a mission.

This is a very crucial point in our life and work. At times, in our enthusiasm for our work with the poor and given so much to do, we may neglect our spiritual foundations of prayer and community life. In our desire to give money to build homes for the poor, we may deprive community and its mission by taking the money from our tithes. In our focus on providing for the material needs of the poor, we may neglect their spiritual needs. In our passion for liberation of the body, we may miss out on salvation of the soul. In doing a great humanitarian work, we might not be carrying out the very plan of God for CFC.

Let nothing of that happen, as we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus.



The kind of God we have: A God we can trust.

Covenant response: Be a light to the world.

Lamentations action: Examine your ways in doing your share of our work with the poor, in relation to community life and mission.

Do you fail to attend your households, prayer assemblies and major CFC events because you choose to rather do some GK work?

Do you take your contributions to GK from your tithe to CFC?

Do you consciously and urgently try to bring our beneficiaries and partners to our CFC renewal programs?

Are you just doing some great humanitarian work, or are you carrying out the very plan of God in allowing CFC to give birth to GK, in order to bring God's light, justice and peace to the world?

Lamentations prayer: "Hear my voice, Lord, when I call; have mercy on me and answer me. your face, Lord, do I seek! Do not hide your face from me; do not repel your servant in anger. You are my help; do not cast me off; do not forsake me, God my savior! Lord, show me your way; lead me on a level path Do not abandon me" (Ps 27:7,8b-9,11a,12a). Lord, I believe I will enjoy your goodness in the land of the

living; I will wait for you, Lord, I will take courage; I will be stouthearted, I will wait for you (Ps 27:13-14). Amen.

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Because of our veering away, CFC was plunged into crisis, with the eventual split. This is something that must not happen again. God already restored CFC (with CFC-FFL), and we must never veer away again from our covenant and God's call.

How do we ensure that?

We must learn the lessons God wants to teach us. These are the lessons of Lamentations. In this Lenten season, I again bring you to another one of the many lessons of Lamentations (from Forty Days of Lamentations).

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Lamentations 121 – **Social without spiritual**

God calls us to be instruments of both salvation (spiritual dimension) and liberation (social dimension). The two are two dimensions of the one gospel. At times, those who work for renewal think only of the spirit, while neglecting the social. But faith without works is dead (Jas 2:17). Indeed, the very mission of Jesus is to bring good news to the poor (Lk 4:18). So the work of renewal is not complete unless the social dimension is included.

But at times the problem is the other way around. Some work for social liberation but neglect the spiritual dimension. Some are so passionate in fighting poverty, injustice and oppression, but in losing track of the things of the Spirit, fall into the so-called theology of liberation or into the gospel of prosperity. This is liberation without Christ at the center. If we freed people from captivity but are not able to bring them to Christ, then that would not fulfill God's will.

There are many Christians also doing good works but not based on prayer and the word, or are not undergoing sufficient formation in the faith. Now even atheists do a lot of good work. But this is not enough. Our ultimate task is to bring people to Christ and to build God's kingdom on earth. We are to be witnesses, by the way we live out lives, in holiness and righteousness.

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In CFC-FFL, we continue to do our work with the poor and work for justice through our Social Ministries. We continue to build communities among the poor, looking to their shelter, health, education, livelihood and other material needs, without neglecting the all-important aspect of bringing them to a vibrant relationship with Jesus and providing a spiritual environment for their growth in faith.

We are also doing prison ministry. Among other places, we are working with inmates of the Maximum Security Compound of the National Bilibid Prison. According to the world they are the scum of the earth. But to Jesus they are his beloved brethren.

In a way, these prisoners are much worse off than those poor who are homeless.

First, they have no freedom. This has been taken from them and they are incarcerated, their movements severely restricted.

Second, they have no family. They have been separated from their families, and for many of them, some of whom are serving life terms, they have been abandoned and forgotten by their relatives.

Third, they hardly have any future. They have lost everything. Even if they are eventually released, they carry the stigma of being an ex-convict. Many are afraid of being near them and would not hire them.

But what they can have is a vibrant faith. In Jesus they can look to love, peace and joy in their lives. We are privileged to be Jesus' instruments for proclaiming this good news to them.

There is much injustice in the world, causing poverty amidst the bountiful resources provided by God. This is not God's will.

We in CFC-FFL have been called "for the victory of justice," and Jesus has grasped us by the hand and formed us, entering into covenant with us, so that we might bring his light to the nations (Is 42:6). We are privileged to be given our mission, the very mission of Jesus, "to open the eyes of the blind, to bring out prisoners from confinement, and from the dungeon, those who live in darkness." (Is 42:7).

Liberation and salvation. The social and the spiritual. The poor and the pure. Two sides of the same evangelistic coin. Both intended by God as the authentic and full gospel of Jesus.

May we truly understand, and live out our calling.

(April 6, 2009)