

SUNDAY MESSENGER



“Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?” (1 John 5:5)

The Quality of Mercy

When Jesus appeared to His disciples on Easter Sunday and breathed on them the Holy Spirit, He barely had one hundred followers. By the year 100, Christians in the Roman empire increased to ten thousand, and one hundred years later, despite persecutions, our brothers and sisters in Christ numbered over two hundred thousand. By the year 312, they reached nearly ten million, constituting the biggest religious movement in the empire. Today, there are 2.3 billion believers and we are constantly growing. What makes Christianity so attractive?

No Needy Person among them

The slums of Manila are characterised by shanties, small houses, very narrow walkways, lack of clean water and sanitation. Such a life was a common reality of nearly all citizens under the rule of Rome. No welfare system, no hospitals, no care centers for those in need. Squeezed in small cubicle size apartments, with no toilets and bathroom, common folks living in cities were exposed to all sorts of hardships. Filth was everywhere, diseases spread easily, and after sunset criminals ruled the streets.

In the midst of this misery Christianity created the islands of charity: "whatever you did to the least of my brothers and sisters you

On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.

(John 20:19-23)

did it to me" (Matt 25:40). Roman philosophers and educators scoffed at mercy and pity was considered a defect of character. Fate or laziness caused the poverty of the masses, therefore, it was irresponsible to change their lot.

Jesus' believers had a totally different mentality. Charity was the primary virtue. Having experienced that God is love, "let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God" (1 John 4:7), wrote Apostle John. This love has nothing to do with romantic infatuation but with concrete action on behalf of those in want, narrated in the Acts: "There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need" (Acts 4:34-35). The apostles, then, chose a group of trustworthy members who were responsible to use the funds to help the Christians in need (Acts 6:1-7; 2 Cor 8:1-4).

This quality of mercy was maintained by the next generation of Christ's believers. Tertulian (155-222) in this way described the practicality of Christian love. Each month, every member put a voluntary donation into a 'piety's deposit fund', according to his or her own ability. The funds were used "to support and bury poor people, to supply the wants of boys and girls of destitute means and parents, and of old persons confined now to the house". They were also used to help those brothers and sisters in Christ who, for their faith, were sent to work in mines, confined to the islands or imprisoned.

Our faith has overcome the world

In the year 165, a terrible epidemic swept through the Roman Empire. Historians say that perhaps as many as a third of the population died of it. Those, who could, ran away from the cities. Those, who could not, tried to avoid any contact with the sick. Those afflicted by the disease were abandoned by their loved ones and the dead piled up on the streets. Christians response was totally different. Believing that Jesus conquered death and considering this passing life as short prelude to the joy of being forever with Christ, they stayed and cared for the sick. Some contracted the disease and died hailed as equal to the martyrs. The rest, by providing first aid to the sick,

contributed to the speedy recovery of many others. Then, rumours spread among the pagans that Christians possessed healing powers.

Atheist intellectuals ridicule us for our faith in everlasting life calling it "pie in the sky". Yet, they fail to see that through centuries Christians put that pie on the table of the poor and needy. During His ministry, our Lord provided bread for the hungry, healing for the afflicted and forgiveness for those who could not forgive themselves. Breathing on us His Spirit, He has empowered us to go and do the same in remembrance of Him.

Our brothers and sisters in Christ knew that in order to overcome the world, they needed to demonstrate their faith in action. The first bishop of Jerusalem made it clear when he wrote that "faith without works is dead" (James 2:17). The apostle Paul seconded it stating that the only thing that matters in Christian life is faith manifesting itself in charity (Gal 5:6). By elevating mercy to the highest position among all virtues, Christian communities have undone the principle of 'survival of the fittest'. Paradoxically, by sharing their material resources with less fortunates and even being ready to sacrifice their lives for the sake of their brothers and sisters, Christians were able to enjoy longer and better quality life.

Conclusion

The letter to the Hebrews calls our Lord "a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people" (Heb 2:17). Christ revealed to us the merciful face of God and taught us to imitate God's mercy: "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful" (Luke 3:36) and called those who are merciful blessed (Matt 5:7). This quality of mercy practiced by Christ's believers has always contributed to the steadfast growth of Christian faith in the world.

God's blessing to all of you