

Transmitting the faith

Space for God to pass by

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"Transmitting the faith" is not, in the final analysis, a question of methods and content. Rather, it starts from a living experience of God's presence through which a journey of discovery can begin. Such an experience cannot be manufactured. Instead, it shines through wherever the Gospel is lived in fraternal love. It is an experience of belonging to God and to others, a life-changing energy and a joy never experienced before. The author is currently a pastoral care coordinator in the Hildesheim (Germany) diocese.

"*You've got to leave space for God to walk through the room.*" This surprising lyric is by Quincy Jones, producer and composer of many Michael Jackson pop songs. Yet on further reflection, perhaps it is not so surprising. It makes us aware that the Spirit of the Risen One pervades the whole of reality with his presence and most certainly in music, sports and everyday life.

The fundamental question is therefore not about creating or manufacturing an experience of God's presence, but about "leaving space" for this presence to be manifested. The fostering of this experience of light, of life and of joy remains a grace. It cannot be *built*. Rather it happens amid our lived lives and leaves us with a wave of nostalgia in the end.

It also means that *transmission of the faith* is not, in the final analysis, a question of methods and content. It is an illusion to think we can produce Christian faith through methodology and (post)modern presentations of content. This is because faith is not the sum of all the teachable content on truth. Instead, it consists of a path of entering and letting oneself be a part of an experience of God's presence. The starting point of everything is a profound stirring of the heart that puts a person on a journey.

First experiences

Faith was a daily part of my family life. We prayed in the morning and evening, went to Mass on Sundays and celebrated Christian feast days. I found in this practice – which is quite rare today – a form and expression of my religiosity as a child and I am grateful for those first steps. Yet they would never have been enough for a lifetime. As a young man, I was no longer searching for *forms* of Christianity, but rather ... *a presence*. But I did not even know how to express the 'substance' of what I was searching for. I just knew that everything I experienced then was not what I was looking for. The 'forms' and 'practices' of that time became less and less convincing for me...

But then *it happened*. Perhaps for the first time, during a diocesan meeting, I experienced a conscious "presence", without being able to understand it. Many people there were unknown to me, and yet I experienced a sense of belonging and energy that changed me. I

felt invaded by a different joy. It became clear to me that I would need to go back and re-immense myself again in that experience, in that simple and extraordinary atmosphere ...

A few months later during a Focolare Movement gathering, this initial experience opened up for me even further. I seemed to grasp that underneath everything was a presence of God in their midst. It made everything that was happening come 'alive'. It was a kind of revelation of a dense reality that changed my life perspective from within. It was clear to me: I always wanted to live *like this*...

Resurrection Experiences

Slowly I understood this experience could not be produced through a technique. I remember my first attempt in my pastoral practice more than twenty years ago. Already then, in northern Germany, I noticed the paradox of good, young people on the path of preparation for Confirmation, but yet without any real initiation into Christianity. Catechesis seemed not to have taken root in them, because Christian faith, in terms of ecclesial content and practice, had no relevance for their lives. So, I was trying a new approach. From experience, I was convinced that neither catechetical content nor Eucharistic liturgies were fully paving the way for faith. Rather, what was needed were experiences of communion capable of opening a space for a new reality to manifest itself: The reality of the presence of God among people.

My attempts made me feel a bit like an explorer in unknown lands. Little by little, a network of small, ongoing meeting groups was born. We shared simple, daily life and played together. Twice a year we traveled to meet other young people in Italy with whom I had had the same experience. Many experienced for the first time this fascination of God's presence even though it was only the beginning of a journey, a first experience.

Presence and form

Much later I discovered the Taizé community, which left me very impressed by the simplicity that reigns there: a group of monks who live following Jesus and open this experience to many young people (and some adults). Life is lived with people from different countries in which each participates with his own commitment, with simple liturgies and prayers. All this creates a style of communion that attracts today, as it did yesterday. There are hundreds and thousands of young people from all over the world. This experience of encounter bears the imprint of the essential and of simplicity. Joy is transmitted and creates an atmosphere that brings us to perceive the immense mystery of God's presence.

Yet not only in Taizé is it possible to experience this. A week spent in the Focolare's small town, Loppiano, or in a Mariapolis, or a weekend in a monastery, school camp, or in living concrete love for one's neighbors, are also methods and moments that frame a space in which one can enter and experience an almost tangible presence of God.

Love and communion put into practice

The DNA of all these experiences is simple. The starting point is a lived communion, the relationship of two or more persons who live in the awareness that God is present among them with his love. This reality can foster - when space is made for others - greater communion. Chiara Lubich, in countless talks, has explained this "art of loving" which consists precisely in living an experience of communion, of universal love that is emptying

and opening oneself to others. And space opens for the passage of God, too. It is not an experience of methodology or content, but a way of life and of love that reveals the Risen One who is passing by.

Transmitting the faith?

If faith is first and foremost a reliance on God who brings us to experience his presence as love and life and light, it is clear that transmission of faith does not consist completely in a path of catechesis or (often forced) initiation into ecclesial praxes. Such paths risk remaining superficial and not centered on the core of the Christian experience: God's passage "through the room". From those spaces opened by love lived between persons comes the blossoming of a passion and longing to live in the same way. And here, too, lies the root of further new "curiosity" that then gives value to a renewed catechesis and liturgy.

Pope Francis' focus on guiding the whole Church to experience synodality seems to me an attempt to bring the whole Church experience to a praxis of lived love that leads to discovery of the Risen One. Unfortunately, it is an experience still seemingly unknown today, even to theologians and pastoral ministers. Yet it seems to be the challenge of today: To discover the presence of the Risen One as the foundation of Christian practice and of new models of life for today's world.