

The spirituality of Faith and Light

Characteristics

Bishop Isaac Martinez



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Faith and Light international

3 rue du Laos 75015 Paris, France - T + 33 1 53 69 44 30
international@foietlumiere.org - www.foietlumiere.org/en

Introduction

“My dear friends”, Saint John tells us in the First Letter, “let us love one another, because love is from God. Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God” (1 Jn 4:7). It is this that we are living at Faith and Light: love, love for the weakest ones, the littlest ones, love of those who have been chosen by God to confuse the wise and the powerful (1 Cor 1:27). It is a relationship of love with the ones with whom Jesus identified himself, the poor: “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” (Mt 25:40) This means that Jesus lives in each person, making them sacred. In other words, each person is sacred like Jesus.

That is why at Faith and Light we have “*the belief that each person with an intellectual disability is fully a person with all the rights of a human being: above all the right to be loved, recognized and respected for himself or herself and in the choices he/she makes*” (...) “*Faith and Light also believes that every person, able-bodied or disabled, is equally loved by God and that Jesus lives in them, even if the person concerned can barely express this.*” (Charter N° II, 1)

Moreover, “*Faith and Light believes that every person, even the most disabled, is called to deepen his or her life in Jesus, to receive all the spiritual richness from his/her Church, sacraments, liturgical tradition, etc. He/she is called to be a source of grace and peace for the whole community, and also for the Churches and for all humanity.*” (Charter N° II, 1)

That is why we can say that each person, even if they have the most serious disability, is called to fulfil themselves through all dimensions of their personality, including the spiritual dimension. More specifically, each person, whatever limitations they face, is capable of living a vibrant, intimate, personal and community encounter with Jesus and his Gospel.

What are the essential elements that characterise the spirituality of Faith and Light?

1. A Spirituality centred on Jesus living as a in the poor person

Jesus identified himself with the marginalised and with those excluded from society, with those who are hungry and thirsty, with foreigners, with those who are naked, sick or in prison. *“Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me”* (Mt 25:31-46).

The encounter with Jesus in the poor person is transformative. It changes you because it is a meeting of love. Spirituality is always for love; it is growth in love. And this growth in Faith and Light comes through the bonding with the poor person who in a particular way is chosen and loved by God.

This love is not just doing things for people; it is not just generosity and giving time and gifts, but it is to be in communion with the weak person, it is friendship, it is the 'to and fro' of love and fellowship. This 'to and fro' of love is receiving and giving; it is bonding. But it is an experience, in faith, of the Trinity, for through this communion we are in communion with Jesus and with the Father. In this way the poor person is sacrament: he or she is a presence of Jesus who opens up our hearts, calls us to conversion and brings us to the heart of the Trinity. But this acceptance and love of the other is sometimes terribly painful. The poor can be filled with anguish, aggression and depression. The poor are calling us to change and to a love we do not always want to give. Frequently the poor are those with a handicap but they can also be parents or friends. Each one of us at different moments are poor, weak and in pain.

Just like Jesus, we are sent out towards the poor, the weak and the littlest ones. Jesus says: *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”* (Luke 4:18-19)

Like Jesus, *“we are sent out to bring Good News to the poor* (Luke 4:18) and to proclaim *release to the captives*. There is so much slavery in today’s world: moral, social or financial slavery. Like Jesus, our mission is to release our brothers and sisters from slavery so that they can live in freedom, in the freedom of the sons and daughters of God.

We meet so many people who are suffering, particularly from illnesses. We can do a lot for them: help them to be cured physically, as

far as we are able; accompany them; remain close to them and bring them joy, consolation and hope.

In modern society, in our globalised world, we continue to endure the rejection and exclusion of the littlest, most fragile ones, and of the person with a learning disability. They are loved by God. Society must recognise that each person has *“the right to be loved, recognised and respected for himself or herself and in the choices he/she makes; the right also to receive whatever help is necessary in order to grow at every level, spiritual and human.”* (Charter II,1)

2. A spirituality of compassion

It is a call to descend the ladder of promotion; it is to be close to those who have the last place: it is the very opposite of seeking power (even to do good). It is to serve and to discover the beatitude of washing people's feet. At Faith and Light all responsibilities are characterised by compassion, and are always focused on service to help people, particularly the poorest, to feel at ease, to find peace, to grow humanly, to discover and live the Good News of Jesus.

Faith and Light is founded and grounded on people in pain and anguish. That is why our communities will always be suffering communities. But it is through this suffering that we discover the joy of resurrection.

It is with this look of compassion that we view the world. So, like Saint Paul, we can say: *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God.”* (2 Co 1:3-4)

Blessed be God, who, through Jesus, shows his predilection for our masters: the poor, those who are suffering, those who are alone and those who are not loved. Jesus has come into the world so that the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised. (Luke 7:22). In other words, to bring consolation, joy and happiness to those who live in anguish, pain and suffering. This is what it means to be compassionate.

“As Jesus came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, if you, even you, had only recognised on this day the things that make for peace!” (Luke 19:41-42) Jesus is crying because Jerusalem has not heard his message and has refused to recognise the messenger of peace. He

has pity for his people: *“Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children.”* (Luke 23:28)

When we analyse the situation our world is in, we are also overtaken by compassion. Reality can disappoint us: far removed from the values of the Gospel, idols have taken the place of God: money and the desire to have, to be able to and to know. What should be done? To face up to this reality, to help our brothers and sisters to stop seeking temporary, fleeting happiness, but rather something that is permanent and durable, we need to go back to what is essential; to turn our eyes towards Jesus and the Gospel. It is the way that leads to complete personal fulfilment, the truth that sets us free, the Life that is given to us in plenitude.

“When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” (Mt 9:36) Like Jesus, we too, when we look at the men and women of this world, are overcome with compassion. They are tired and downcast. We would like to do something, to be able to help them, to become more involved. What does Jesus do? How does he rise to this challenge? Jesus roams around the towns and the villages, teaches in the synagogues, proclaims the Good News of the Kingdom, cures all diseases and disabilities (Mt 9:35). That is what we are doing at Faith and Light. Through the community meetings and the activities that we organise, and with our eyes and hearts full of compassion, we are seeking every possible way for the poorest ones, particularly those with a learning disability, to be the centre of our attention and the very *raison d'être* of our mission.

3. A spirituality of community

Faith and Light is community, it is not a movement oriented towards doing things, organising schools, work-shops or even catechetical activities. It is a community where people are bonded together in love and are called to care for each other, pray for each other and together be a sign of the resurrection.

They will know you are my disciples by the love you have for one another. Community life is demanding and thus painful. It is not easy to love people, to listen and to be attentive to each one, to help each one exercise their particular gift and find their place. The community life is a continual process of death and resurrection. But it is also a

place of celebration, a sign of the Kingdom; it is to be one Body reborn in the Spirit where we can live in faith, an experience of that love which unites the Father to the Son in the Holy Spirit. And in the Body each person, whether they be parents, people with disabilities, or friends, is precious and important.

One of the characteristics of Faith and Light is that, in the community, we try to love the weakest and littlest ones just as Jesus loves them: intensely and profoundly, whilst always remembering “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” (Jn 15:13) God’s love is so great that he gave his life and went even as far as to die on the cross. His love was complete until the very end. With him, we are no longer servants, but friends. And he calls upon us to love the Father and each members of the human family with the same intensity and depth as he does. It is the strength of love that heals broken hearts, which releases more energy so that we can love each other more, which transforms people, society and reality, peoples and nations, whilst reinforcing and creating deep links of friendship, fraternity and communion.

In the community, we are trying to live what Pope John-Paul II has called the spirituality of communion (Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, N° 43). This is a spirituality that signifies:

- above all the heart's contemplation of the mystery of the Trinity dwelling in us, and whose light we must also be able to see shining on the face of the brothers and sisters around us;
- an ability to think of our brothers and sisters in faith within the profound unity of the Mystical Body, and therefore as “*those who are a part of me*”. This makes us able to share their joys and sufferings, to sense their desires and attend to their needs, to offer them deep and genuine friendship;
- the heart's contemplation of the mystery of the Trinity dwelling in us, and whose light we must also be able to see shining on the face of the brothers and sisters around us;
- ‘making room’ for one’s brother or sister, by bearing ‘one another’s burdens’ (Ga 6:2) and by resisting the selfish temptations which continually beset us, setting traps and provoking competition, careerism, distrust and jealousy.

This is what we live at Faith and Light with people who have a learning disability, but also with parents and friends, This spirituality tries to follow Jesus's invitation to eat from the same table as the poor, the maimed, the lame and the blind (Luke 14:13). This is a spirituality that goes deeper on a personal and a community level when members get together to share, pray and celebrate and through the friendship that is revealed outside of the community meetings.

4. A spirituality of lay people

Priests and pastors are not the community leaders; they have an important role, but as people of God, people of prayer, people who bring the Word of God and the sacraments, people of compassion, of reconciliation and of peace who help build communities of faith.

"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." (1 P 2:9-10)

Faith and Light is a movement of laypeople, men and women, where everyone exercises their charisma, talents, gift and qualities to serve others, especially the littlest and weakest ones, people who have a learning disability. In doing this, we proclaim the wonders of God and fulfil our vocation which is rooted in the baptism and for which we form the People of God. This is a people, made up of different states, functions and vocations (Cf. 1 Cor :12). This is a people, where together, parents, friends and people with a learning disability are striving to become holy and to attain the perfection asked for by Jesus: *"Be perfect, therefore, as your Heavenly Father is perfect."* (Mt 5:48).

Each member of Faith and Light is a disciple of Jesus who is trying to live the Gospel. We want to listen to the Word of God, to meditate on this and to put it into practice. We want our behaviour, acts, gestures, words and actions to be coherent and true to what Jesus has taught us, in particular according to the Beatitudes (Mt 5:3-12), love to the end (Jn 13:1) and the pardon (Jn 8:1-11).

5. A spirituality of the Church

We do not want Faith and Light to be a highly centralized movement cut off from the local church. People with disabilities and their parents are frequently already part of a parish. They need the support

of their parish community. In this way they are called to live a spirituality which is communion with their bishop or their own church authorities.

The members of Faith and Light are conscious that they belong to and are integrated in a church, the Body of Christ, and participate fully in its life and mission. They participate in its life through listening to the Word of God and through sacraments, liturgy and prayer. They participate in the Church's mission through their commitment to evangelisation in their parish or their diocese. Each of us finds, in his own Church, the necessary resources to progress further towards holiness.

6. An intercultural spirituality

I am thinking of Faith and Light in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America. Faith and Light does not want to transpose a European culture or to colonize in any way. That means that each community is called to live the essential of Faith and Light in its own culture with all what that culture offers.

By maintaining their own distinct cultures, the Faith and Light communities recognise that God is present in each of us and that he expresses himself, manifests himself and saves us through each one of them. Jesus himself set the example. He assumed the culture of his people, purified it and brought it to its fulfilment.

However, beyond recognising the presence of God in each culture, in the relationships between different cultures that we experience in community meetings, there is a mutual recognition, a respect, an enrichment and growth through the good that we discover in the Other. And it is together that we will reach fulfilment as human beings.

7. An ecumenical spirituality

That is to say, all the Faith and Light communities must yearn and work for the unity of all Christians. Divisions are a scandal and bring pain to people with disabilities. There is only one Father of all, only one Saviour of all, only one Spirit living in all, only one baptism, only one Word of God, source of life for all. Some communities will belong to one particular denomination; others will be inter denominational; all will belong to the one family of Faith and Light which offers a spirituality where we are truly open to the gift of the Spirit in others.

Saint Paul (cf. Eph 4:2-6) invites us to live our vocation in dignity, *“with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”* There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. This is what is asked of us, that we continue to seek out unity for all Christians. We need to work tirelessly and enthusiastically, so that we eventually make up just the one Body and the one Spirit, *“just as you were called to the one hope of your calling”*. Finally, that all of us be united in *“one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.”*

Jesus tells us: *“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”* (Mt 5:43-48). He invites us to be like the heavenly Father who loves without limits, indiscriminately and without differences, in order to break down walls and barriers and *“he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.”* Perfection in love means to love everyone, and not just those who love us and to welcome those who welcome us; it is destroying and overcoming all barriers so that we can love our enemies. By loving in this way, we will be contributing to the unity of all believers in Jesus, to the full communion of the Christian Churches and to the creation of a civilization of love to which we aspire so much, and which is the culmination of all our efforts. Then we will live in a world that is more united and fraternal and where people stand side by side.

Let us seek out that which unifies us. Pope Francis tells us: *“How many important things unite us! If we really believe in the abundantly free working of the Holy Spirit, we can learn so much from one another! It is not just about being better informed about others, but rather about reaping what the Spirit has sown in them”* (Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium No. 246)

Many Faith and Light communities are already, in their various ways, living this ecumenical spirit, living that unity that Jesus asks of us (Jn 17:20-23). This is what we want to share with the world, in so doing contributing to the creation of a perfect communion between believers, together with the Father and with Jesus (1 Jn 1:3-4) and through the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

We live Faith and Light's spirituality in joy because at Easter 1971 our birth was accompanied by a "great cry of joy". We are living the joy that Jesus gives us. We continue to try and preserve this aspect of our spirituality which characterises our movement, always reminding ourselves that *"Jesus has come to announce the year of the Lord's favour."* (Cf. Lc 4:19) A year of grace, a time of celebration and feasting, a moment when everything returns to its original state. It is a new beginning. A time of feasting that we always celebrate at Faith and Light:

- times of celebration and joy with people who have a learning disability, who have found a place that exudes affection and tenderness;
- times of celebration and joy of service, care and attention for families (parents, brothers and sisters);
- times of celebration and joy of friends and chaplains, who offer testimonies of enthusiasm, free time and generosity;
- times of celebration, of thanksgiving and joy because all this makes us feel "Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation" (2 Cor 1,3);
- times of grace, of celebration and joy, which we want to spread around the world. Moments of delight that we experience right now will become sources of eternal joy.

For deepening

1. Share our spiritual experiences at a personal and community level.
2. Which characteristic of Faith and Light's spirituality helps me grow in my path with Jesus?
3. Are there other characteristics of the spirituality of Faith and Light?

