Pope Leo XIV, Colleague and Friend

Reflections by Brother Álvaro Rodríguez Echeverría, former Superior General of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, on the election of Pope Leo XIV, with whom he shared in the Union of Superiors General (USG) and invited to preach the retreat prior to the 45th General Chapter in 2014.

The election of Pope Leo XIV has been a very special salvific event for me and has caused me great joy. **The title of these lines, Friend and Colleague, may seem daring, but it corresponds to a very enriching reality that I have lived for many years**.

In fact, our periods, the Pope as Prior General of the Order of Saint Augustine, and in my case as Superior General of the Institute, coincided for 12 years (from 2001 to 2013), in which **we had the opportunity to meet every semester for a two-and-a-half-day assembly of reflection**. It was a very beautiful experience because it was an encounter in deep fraternity and a very serious discernment of the search for God's will in our religious life today and here.

On the other hand, having served two terms as president of the USG, this allowed me to be closer to the Superiors General, including the present Pope Leo XIV. **I remember him as a friendly religious, always close, with a deep spirituality and great availability**.

The first words of Pope Leo XIV inviting us to unity and to live community, as essential elements of mission, remind me of the reflections of those years on the dialogue that must be part of the heart of our religious life today and of the mission with which we intend to collaborate in the building of the Reign of God. **Our reflection invited us to a religious life, a sign rather than a model, focused on being rather than doing**. A religious life capable of making present God the Trinity, communion of persons.

Experts in Communion

And we expressed our desire to create a more human world that corresponds to God's salvific plan manifested in Jesus, which should lead us not only to offer an

alternative model of society, through the bonds of union and the overcoming of differences in charity, within our communities, but also **to be "experts in communion" as an art of living, as a word of tenderness, as a sacrament that makes visible the compassion of an incarnate God and his love for all, particularly the excluded and the last.**

I remember in a special way our involvement in the Synod on the New Evangelisation in 2012. Both of us were among the 20 Superiors General chosen to take part in this ecclesial event. As we always did – I personally had taken part in the Synods on the Bishops and on the Eucharist – we met beforehand to distribute the topics we were going to present at the Synod and we shared them among ourselves. **My presentation was on young people and the new evangelisation and the theme developed by the then Prior Robert Prevost was on the characteristics of the New Evangelisation**. I think it is worth remembering what he told us then, which seems to me to be totally in line with what he is proposing to us today as Pope:

"The universal Church, and each particular Church, develops evangelisation when it displays the totality of the elements of which it is composed, that is to say:

- when, endowed with a profound missionary sense, it seeks to **renew the humanity in the midst of which it lives**, transforming with the power of the Gospel the criteria, the values, the trends of thought, the models of life that are in contrast with the Kingdom of God;
- when it becomes, for the specific territory or area to which it is sent, a **witness to the values of the Kingdom**, to the new life it brings with it;
- when it **explicitly proclaims the Gospel** to non-believers (missionary preaching), and develops an adequate education of believers in the faith (catechesis, homily, teaching of theology…);
- when it **seeks to stimulate conversion**, i.e. the adherence of the heart to the Kingdom of God, to the "new world", to the new state of affairs, to the new way of being, of living, of living together, which the Gospel inaugurates, when it creates community spaces where faith can be nourished, shared, lived, thus structuring itself into living Christian communities, which are "light of the world" and "salt of the earth";
- when it **celebrates in sacramental signs** the presence of Jesus, the Lord, and the gift of the Holy Spirit in the midst of the community;
- when it develops, finally, **an active apostolate in different**

environments: in the big cities and in the small villages, in the working class and in the rural areas, among the educated and among the simple ones.

And, he summed up the above with these beautiful words

"Since the Church is essentially evangelising, identifies herself as: **missionary**, **incarnated** in the real problems of people, **communitarian**, **festive**, **proclaimer** of the Gospel to those who do not believe, **educator** of believers in the faith, in constant **renewal** and **conversion**, sign of the Reign of God".

At the end of my term as Superior General, and because of the impact that Father Robert Prevost had made on me, I invited him to animate our three-day retreat prior to our 45th General Chapter. He had already finished his stay in Rome and had come from the United States where, after a sabbatical year, he was beginning an important service to his Order in the field of formation.

As he told us in his first words, he was very grateful for our invitation, among other things, because thanks to it, he would be able to participate in the canonisation of John XXIII and John Paul II, which took place the following Sunday. So, it was thanks to us Brothers that Pope Leo XIV had the grace to take part in the canonisation of two of his predecessors in the chair of Peter and as bishops of Rome.

The retreat was intended as a time of interiorisation that would allow us to listen to the Spirit, to build community based on the commandment of love: "Love one another as I have loved you" (Jn 13:34), and to be open to the future of God who sends us on mission. I will be confined to quoting a text that sums up very well Father Robert Prevost's vision of our service in the Church:

> *"Not just because of what you do in terms of education, but because of who you are. And while it may be a challenge for you today to understand this and to see the reality of the fraternity in the light of vocational crises and a Church that perhaps does not always appreciate […]* ***rest assured that your mission is necessary, deeply appreciated by many of us, and fundamental to the future of the Church****".*

In my words of thanks at the end of the Retreat, I told my Brothers that inviting

him in May 2013, almost a year before the General Chapter, had been one of the most enriching and providential decisions that, together with the preparatory commission, we had taken. As a son of St. Augustine, and we all have something of Augustine in our blood, each of his words touched our hearts, and reminded us of a text of the Meditation that our Founder dedicated to this saint, referring to our Institute and inviting us to make our own two virtues that characterized him: "this community can be very useful to the Church. But be convinced that it will be so only to the extent that it is based on these two foundations, namely piety and humility, which will make it unshakable". And he commented for the Brother capitulants that **today** we can **translate piety as depth, interiority, spirituality, silence, and that humility must be expressed today above all as gratuitous and disinterested service**.

And I would like to end these reflections by recalling what our Founder expressed to us in his testament of 1719 and which today we must update with deep love and with our prayer for our Pope Leo XIV.

> *"First, I recommend my soul to God and, next, all the Brothers of the Society of the Christian Schools with whom he has associated me. I urge them, above all else, always to show entire submission to the Church, especially in these evil times, and to give proof of this by* ***never separating themselves in anything from our Holy Father the Pope and from the Church of Rome****, always remembering that I sent two Brothers to Rome to ask God for the grace that their Society might always be entirely submissive".*

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