

Lent 2022

The Bishop's contribution to discernment in the Church

Some reflections for our communal journey towards Easter.

Dear friends,

I would like to offer you these reflections, the fruit of my meditation. They are a contribution to our discernment and prayer as we set out on the road to Easter. May we have the joy of allowing ourselves to be renewed by the Lord during this time of Lent, so that we can be better witnesses to Jesus.

1. Undeniably Seychelles has experienced strong economic growth from the post-independence years.

1.a This economic growth has led to a clear improvement in living conditions for the majority of the population: more material comfort, an end to the abject poverty, (travay pou ganny manze tanto!) education for all, better health care, a retirement pension for all, valorisation of the Creole language and culture, openness to the outside world thanks to TV, travel as well as the development of computer technology. Most importantly, Seychellois have taken their destiny into their own hands in all sectors of Seychellois society.

1.b This growing social body has also experienced jolts and sufferings of which we are more aware after listening to various testimonies through the 'Truth and Reconciliation Commission'.

2. Nor can we fail to notice that at the heart of our changing society (which is true for any society), our social body is experiencing strong feverish outbreaks, (which is true for any society), * the main symptoms of which are among others :

a large percentage of our population is enslaved by addictions, mainly drugs, alcohol and gambling.

A weakening of families linked to violence, various forms of abuse, including abuse of minors; a trivialisation of sexuality and a blurring of reference points.

A disturbing increase in crime rate, which we unfortunately hear about too often on the news or on the radio.

Our art of living together in its various components (food, language, habitat etc.), that is to say our Creole culture, is threatened by the headwinds of globalisation.

3. Nor **can we fail to ask**: what are the causes of these symptoms? What are the reasons for this malaise?

Is it related to the frantic race for consumption? 'temples' of consumption and shopping seem more attractive than churches!

Is it linked to a model of society where the appearance, 'lanmizman', the all at once, the excessive competition with my neighbour, my colleague at work etc. seems to have taken over traditional values such as: effort, principles of life, sharing...

Is it linked to the fact that this excessive competition leads to ever greater (non-essential) needs to be satisfied at any price, even if this means selling one's soul to the devil, for example, by becoming a drug dealer, and therefore a merchant of death?

Is there a link between this existential void - a life devoid of meaning because it is reduced to consumption - and the abuses we are witnessing in our families and in the different strata of society?

3. a. We are at a crossroads in our common history. Our choices (**or** lack of them) will have a heavy impact on the society in which we want to live and which we want to leave to future generations.

But as one theologian points out: "We must be concerned about the planet we are leaving to our children, **but** also about the children we are leaving to the planet".

4. Of course, the Christian community is at the heart of this human mixture and not beside or above it! As this text from the Second Vatican Council reminds us: *"the joys and hopes, the sorrows and anxieties of the people of this age, especially the poor and suffering, are also the joys and hopes, the sorrows and anxieties of the followers of Jesus."* (Gaudium et Spes.)

4.a The Catholic Church in the Seychelles, at the invitation of Pope Francis, like the other Churches, is currently undergoing a synod on synodality.

A synodal Church is a Church where there are no leaders on one side and followers on the other.

A synodal Church is a community of believers, a people on the move, in order to discern, in the Holy Spirit, what Jesus expects of us in order to be the salt of his Gospel in this human mixture, that is to say in each of our families, in the Church-family and in the great family of our Seychellois society.

A synodal church is a body with Jesus as its head and each baptised person as a member - each more important than the other - and with bishops and ordained ministers as humble servants. We need each other's support, even the most fragile and weak members, so as to move forward in our journey.

4.b. The first step was extremely important because, without a minimum of self-esteem, a person, a family or a human community will find it very difficult to move forward. If we tell a person all the time that he or she is nothing, he or she is likely to think that he or she is worthless! As a believer it is so important to recognise that we have value in the eyes of God and that, with all our frailties and weaknesses, the Lord is with us to help us take *pti lepa - pti lepa*.

4.c Therefore, after a very important **first step** where we took the time to take stock of all the positive steps taken within each of our families, the Church-family, within the great family of our Seychellois society, and after having given thanks to the Lord for the presence and the accompaniment of Jesus-Emmanuel, we approach the next step.

4.d. Therefore, **with the Lenten season**, we enter a new stage in our synodal journey. Lent is an **opportunity**. With the Lord, we can make a fresh start and begin our journey again, even if it is in a different way.

We are invited to ask ourselves a simple question: *"With God's encouragement and*

strength, what conversions are we called to experience in order to be a better witness to Jesus?

Yes, what are the conversions to be lived *within each of our families, the Church-family and the great family of Seychelles society* so that we may be freer, more responsible and more fraternal?

I encourage you personally, but also in groups (in your family, among colleagues or friends, within the synodal groups) to ask yourselves questions, to speak out and to share your reflections with us (the team responsible for the synod). (Address: Miss Maryvonne Gabriel : PO Box 43, Victoria, Mahé; email secretaryrcc@email.sc). Everything you share is so important for our discernment: what does Jesus expect of us here in the Seychelles?

5. In this Lenten season, I invite us **to return to the living source of the Holy Scriptures** to enter into conversation with our Lord. In this way, without neglecting other analyses, we will be able to benefit from such an important resource (the Word of God) in order to go to the very root of our problems, and even of our errors, **but above all**, with the help of the Lord and the participation of all of us, to invent tomorrow.

To do this, I suggest that you meditate on the readings that the liturgy proposes to us each Sunday of Lent.

5.1 1st Sunday of Lent: Luke 4 vs 1-13

Jesus is confronted with 3 fundamental temptations that are at the root of the plagues that deeply wound our personal and social lives.

The devil wants to turn us away from the path of happiness. He is the liar. What is serious about sin is not so much to disobey moral rules as to divert us from the path of a successful life.

Repelling the first temptation, Jesus said to the devil: *'It is not by bread **alone** that a man must live.'*

Of course, everyone needs bread and the pursuit of well-being is far from being condemnable, just like sharing a good meal with family and friends! The important word in Jesus' warning is, it seems to me, **ONLY**. Life is not ONLY 'manze, bwar, anmize'. Gluttony (the race to consume all kinds of things), lust (enjoyment for the sake of enjoyment) are cancers in our lives.

The second temptation is the temptation to possession as the devil suggests: 'to have it all' and that at any cost, even prostrating ourselves before him. How tempting it is to sell our conscience, our body, our soul to the devil in order to have easy money and thus satisfy our thirst for more and more!

The third temptation is the temptation of fatalism, of a magical religion. *"Throw yourself down from here the angels will carry you on their hands..."*. Instead of facing up to our problems and assuming our responsibilities with the strength of God, we abandon ourselves to superstitious practices, to 'nanm' banishing sessions that take away our responsibility, even if it gives us the illusion of relief!

Jesus is stronger than evil. With the power of the Holy Spirit, sin is not a fatality. To sin is not human. To sin is to renounce our humanity.

5.2. Second Sunday of Lent: Luke 9 vs 28-36

On this second Sunday of Lent, we are invited to be witnesses, like Peter, James and John, to Jesus' experience of the transfiguration on the mountain.

In the Bible, the mountain is a privileged place of encounter with God. Let us think, among others, of Moses and the prophet Elijah.

At the heart of a relationship of total trust in God his Father, Jesus is transfigured. Just as light brings out the different colours in a stained glass window, Jesus' relationship with his Father is a light that helps us discover who Jesus is: *"This is my beloved son...listen to him."*

During this Lent, we too are invited to go up the mountain, following Jesus' invitation. With our brothers and sisters in faith, by spending time in the company of Jesus in silence, listening to his Word, talking to him about everything in our lives, we are invited to enter into the dynamics of his relationship with God his Father. In the heart of this heart-to-heart, even if there is so much mud on our heart, let us be transfigured. Then, more transparent to the light of God, we will be able, once we have come down from the mountain, to continue, in joy, our human journey, but in a different way.

5.3 Third Sunday of Lent: Luke 13 vs 1-9

For the Bible, God does not send curses. Pilate's massacre of the Galileans and the fall of the Siloam's tower, which killed 18 people, is not a punishment from God. This is what Jesus tells us in the gospel that we will hear on this third Sunday of Lent.

The God who makes himself known in the Bible is a God who sees the misery of his people. A God who suffers when his people suffer. A God who wants to free us from our modern-day slavery: slavery to addictions such as pornography, superstition and magical prayer, money made at any price.

God is a patient God towards us. He stands by us. He takes us by the hand. He invites us to conversion so that our life does not turn into a hell. He believes in us and in our ability to change, but as St Augustine tells us: *"God created us without us, but he does not want to save us without us."*

Christian prayer is not a magical incantation. To pray is to welcome God who is an Abba (a father with a mother's heart) as Jesus tells us.

In this Lenten season, let us ask the Holy Spirit for the joy of living conversions as a family, as a Church-family and within the great family of our Seychellois society. With all our human freedom, let us be liberated by God the Father who comes to save us through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

5.4 Fourth Sunday in Lent: Luke 15 vs 1-32

God comes looking for us as this father goes looking for his two sons - the younger and the older - in the gospel we are invited to meditate on this fourth Sunday of Lent.

Often enough we say that we are looking for God. This is not false! Nevertheless, for the Christian faith, it is always God who takes the initiative and who first comes in search of us. It is because God seeks us that we seek him.

In the parable of the Father, full of love, there are two sons. Most probably we (personally but also as a Christian community) are a bit like these two sons!

Sometimes we are like the younger son. We think, even if we don't officially admit it, that the further we are from God, the freer we will be to live our lives to the fullest. God and his commandments are seen as a hindrance to the joy of living. We have to admit that sometimes our Christian communities look a bit sad - *'figir boude e sever'* - and some religious groups do recruitment marketing, not hesitating to 'profit' from the suffering of people. For many, the path outside religion seems to be more palatable! On the other hand, like the younger son, we often have an interested relationship with God. We pray to him, most often to make requests! We return, like the younger son, when we have exhausted all other possibilities - *'Ki wa fer!'*

Other times we are like the older son. We have a 'give and take' relationship with God. I am a good churchgoer and it is not fair that I am sick! As a Christian community, but also personally, we are sometimes rigid. We have harsh words for those who have gone astray. In short, we who obey the commandments (or claim to live them) are sometimes, like the elder son, intolerant of those who have fallen away like the younger son. We are not like those people...idolaters, vicious, liars!

The good news is that the father of the parable goes out and meets the two sons. Likewise, because he loves us, God comes to meet us. God invites us to joy and celebration. In this Lenten season, let us let God embrace us and dance our lives to the rhythm of the Gospel. Let us be a church on the move, following God's example.

5th Sunday of Lent John 8:1-11

What Good News (Gospel) are we invited to hear this morning? Just as he said to the adulteress, Jesus says to each of us, but also to each of our families and to our Christian community: *"I do not condemn you either. Go and sin no more."*

The synod we are living through invites us to truth. To acknowledge our adulteries, not to humiliate ourselves, but to hear again these words of Jesus. *'I do not condemn you'*. God forgives us of all our idolatries, that is, the false gods of money at any price, the false gods of excessive consumption, of trivialised sexuality. God frees us, freely and by his forgiveness, from all our demons that lead us to our ruin. *'Go, and from now on do not sin.'* What good news! God believes in us. With his support Jesus (each one of us but also our community) believes in our ability to change, to rise up and to live a truly human life.

Many stonings happen every day and 'live' through social networks. How many people are harassed by nasty words or degrading pictures! How many people, like this adulterous woman, are dragged through the mud. Behind the anonymity of our screens, sometimes through our 'likes', we are actors or spectators of these modern-day stonings live.

By our terse messages we can so easily and cowardly destroy not only the reputation of a person but the person himself. May we hear the words of Jesus: *"He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her."*

It is not, of course, a question of not denouncing situations that degrade the humanity in us and around us. It is certainly not a question of saying that in the end we are all corrupt. All rotten! No, we have a duty of truth and justice. On the other hand, as Pope Benedict XVI reminds us, charity goes beyond justice, which is also necessary. We are invited, even in the midst of our struggles against all that degrades humans, to have compassionate hearts. We fight prostitution in all its forms - which enslaves people - but we do not judge prostitutes.

6. Conclusion.

The time of the synod to promote a synodal Church is a time of discernment. We are all invited to be attentive to the realities of our lives and, by illuminating them in the light of the Gospel, to allow ourselves to be freed by Jesus. May this Lenten season be a favourable moment, with the strength of God, to cross (Easter) the 'Red Sea' again and take the road to freedom, brotherhood and the Kingdom of God.

+ Alain Harel