

SIGNS OF DIVINE GRACE GOD GUIDES THE HISTORY OF OUR CONGREGATION

Seventeen-year old Joseph was more loved by his father Jacob than any of his brothers. They hated Joseph for the love their father bestowed on him. This hatred grew stronger when Joseph told them his prophetic dreams, according to which he was to reign over them in the future. His brothers even plotted to kill him. Instead, they captured him and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. They convinced their father that wild beasts had devoured Joseph. Meanwhile the merchants sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, a courtier of Pharaoh. "But since the Lord was with him, Joseph got on very well" (Gen 39:2). He quickly gained the esteem of his Egyptian master and was assigned to his household. Potiphar's wife, having repeatedly failed to seduce Joseph, accused him of attempted rape, and Joseph was thrown into jail. However, "the Lord remained with Joseph; He showed him kindness by making the chief jailer well-disposed toward him" (Gen 39:21). He put Joseph in charge of all the prisoners. One day Joseph was able to favorably interpret the dream of the Pharaoh's cupbearer, who had been put in custody in the same jail, assuring him that in three days time he would be set free. Having left the prison, just as Joseph prophesized, the cupbearer forgot about him at once. However, two years later, when no one was able to understand the meaning of a Pharaoh's dream, the cupbearer remembered our Hebrew. Summoned before the Pharaoh, Joseph told him that God intended to send to Egypt and the world seven years of great abundance followed by seven years of famine. The Pharaoh believed this prophecy and made Joseph the second most important man in the country and placed him in charge of the whole land of Egypt.

Considering his brothers' hatred and the fact of having been sold into slavery in Egypt, one could see the subsequent several years of Joseph's life as a period of continuous humiliation, injustice, and misfortune. However, the author of the Book of Genesis assures us that all through this time God was always with Joseph and Joseph was totally devoted to God. Thus, we reach the culminating point – the arrival of Joseph's brothers to Egypt after two years of famine. According to their father's order, they want to buy grain. They stood before Joseph without recognizing him, but being recognized by him. Modern-day novels or movies would naturally take the opportunity here to show us the revenge which powerful Joseph might have taken on the impoverished brothers – his torturers. At this point, the imagination might have suggested to the authors various methods of physical and psychic destruction of those former villains along with their families and friends. But in Joseph's words, in which he addressed his brothers, the biblical author gives us a key to understanding his story and the story of our Congregation and each one of us: "[...] do not be distressed, and do not reproach yourselves for having sold me here. It was really for the sake of saving lives that God sent me here ahead of you. For two years now the famine has been in the land, and for five more years tillage will yield no harvest. God, therefore, sent me on ahead of you to ensure for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives in an extraordinary deliverance. So it was not really you but God who had me come here; and He has made of me a father of Pharaoh, lord of all his household, and ruler over the whole land of Egypt" (Gen 45:5-8).

Joseph assures us that regardless of what our fate is and what we think of it, the Lord God is the master of history. God guides us through difficult and incomprehensible events and circumstances, seemingly senseless and cruel. God knows the solution to our problems and the boundary of history. He is the One who knows the sense and the goal of each event in the life of an individual and the whole world. What seems today as a defeat or a curse, tomorrow may turn out to be a blessing, a grace, an important element of God's plan for each one of us, for the whole world. Joseph trusted God unquestionably, and it saw him through some very dramatic moments of his life. It is possible, that in the light of the salvation of Israel, he was able to see the sense of all the previous injustices and humiliations, which he had to bear. He was given to understand the sense of his entire life and its role in God's plan already during his lifetime. The same was the lot of Gideon, Moses, David, and many other heroes of the Old and New Testament.

Our Lord Jesus Christ was called to an even greater trust in God. Along with His mother, He could have been stoned to death while still in her womb, since she conceived by the Holy Spirit before settling down with Joseph. Later, Herod endangered His life, which was saved thanks to the flight into Egypt taken by the Holy Family. Jesus frequently risked His life because of His teaching on earth, since the Pharisees and the scribes marked Him for death. However, no one could harm Him until the moment foreseen by the Father; even when people wanted to stone Him outside the town: He just passed through the crowd and walked away. For thirty years He lived in concealment. For three years He taught, healed, expelled evil spirits, and rose from the dead. But the three hours during which He was dying on the cross, abandoned by nearly everyone, derided by the elders of Israel, soldiers, passersby, and prisoners, proved to be the most important of all. In human terms, one would call those three hours on Golgotha nothing but a tragedy, a defeat, a failure. The victory came three days later. Those three hours on Golgotha can be seen and perceived as the center of the history of the universe only from the perspective of Christ's resurrection, the descent of the Holy Spirit, and the Ascension of the Lord; from the perspective of the history of the Church and the world; from the perspective that no human being knew at the time. Today, looking on the history of our Congregation and each one of us, we will surely notice more signs of God's

grace than were seen by our predecessors or by ourselves in the past. In the future we shall see even more of these signs, when we'll look at the history from the perspective of time and be able to see it more with the eyes of God than with human eyes.

The vocation of every Christian is to adhere to the love of God, to draw from the grace of God, and to imitate Jesus Christ. In addition, in the case of the members of a religious order, it is a matter of each individual and the whole community imitating Christ's poverty, obedience and chastity in a particular way. The story of our Founder – Bl. Stanislaus Papczyński – is a process of formation, in which the Holy Spirit consequently led and formed our Founder following the model of Jesus Christ. Divine Providence did not spare Janek Papczyński difficult and life-threatening events even in his youth. Several times he was close to drowning. First, he could not learn the alphabet then he had to run away from school because of his teacher's immoral behavior. He obtained his education through great efforts, leaving from various towns and fleeing before attacking armies or epidemics. He fell seriously ill in Lviv and, being all alone, was near death. Through all those events, God chiseled in our Founder perseverance and fortitude, detachment from places and persons, love for the poor and openness to their needs, and certainty that everything is a grace from God and that He constantly cares about our lives and leads us along.

Father Stanislaus Papczyński made three vows in the Piarist Order and received his ordination to the priesthood. He also continued his education in this Order, while serving both the mighty and the poorest of this world in a variety of ways. In this Order, he learned how to lead the community life and how to fight for it. The will of God, truth, and goodness were the values that he served. Through many trials and rejections, he united with the suffering and crucified Christ through prayers and through his service as a priest and a preacher. For the sake of the good and the peace of the Piarist community, with the permission of the Holy See and in spite of great pain and a sense of injustice, he left the Order, even though he considered it to be his home and his spiritual tutor. We can say today, that the Piarist period was for Fr. Papczyński a time of novitiate and a preparation for the work to which God called him in the big picture – the founding and directing of the Order of the Immaculate Conception of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary.

At the beginning of the Marian Order, God revealed to Fr. Papczyński that he had to put all of his hope in God, not in the mighty of this world. People who swore their support were known to withdraw it, while God was creating the new religious community. Father Papczyński accepted and formed his companions who were not ideal, but rather average people whom God had sent to him. In the cause, which in human terms could be seen as dysfunctional for lack of support, lack of proper candidates, lack of location, God breathed life. The Holy Spirit led Fr. Papczyński along in prayer through mystical visions, conversations with people, and spiritual guidance. Having his own vision and desires, the Blessed instead humbly accepted the Divine guidance which was fulfilled through the service of the Church. The bishop visiting Puszcza Korabiewska assigned an eremetical character to the Marian Order, while our Blessed Founder had wished for an apostolic community. The process of obtaining papal approval also went very slowly, and when the Marians finally received it, it was not based on their own rule, but on the Rule of the Ten Virtues of the Most B.V.M. After nearly 30 years of endeavors to establish the Marian Order, Fr. Papczyński was the first to make his perpetual vows... and he passed away only a few months later. Until Fr. Stanislaus's last day, God was teaching him to live in total trust, while uncovering only a small stretch of the road ahead, so that everything in this "little Congregation of the Immaculate Conception, Advocate of the Deceased" (Second Testament, New Jerusalem, 1701, 5) was from God and for God alone.

On Fr. Papczyński's dying day there were only several Marians residing in three modest houses (Puszcza Korabiewska, New Jerusalem, Gozlin). When St. Francis of Assisi died, there were already several thousands of his confreres. Before St. Ignatius Loyola passed on, he witnessed the Jesuits established in many places of the world. On the other hand, Charles de Foucauld died alone without any companions. By an extraordinary decree of God, the Marians emerged as the "last in the line and the smallest Congregation of Fathers of the Blessed Virgin Mary Conceived without Sin" (Fundatio Domus Recollectionis, Puszcza Korabiewska 1675, 1). Our Blessed Founder had no doubts that it came to be only through the mercy of God and His grace, because "Divine goodness and wisdom starts and brings into life everything, in spite of innumerable difficulties and obstacles, even when the means are unfit from a human perspective, for there is nothing impossible for the Almighty." (ibid.)

After the Founder's death, the Marian Order developed in stages, thanks to several illustrious personalities. In 1779, the General Procure of the Congregation was established in Rome. The community growth reached its peak in 1781, when 13 of its monasteries hosted almost 150 members. After the third partition of Poland in 1795, the Marian monasteries found themselves in three different occupied territories: Russian, Prussian, and Austrian. From 1815, after the Kingdom of Poland was created during the Congress of Vienna, all Marian monasteries were in the territory under Russian occupation. In 1798, the Napoleonic officials closed down our monastery in Rome, and in 1834 the Marians in Portugal was annulled by the Portuguese government (prior to that they managed to establish an independent branch of the Order). In 1864, in response to the January Uprising and the members of

religious order's participation in it, the Russian government issued a decree that was to meant to annihilate all religious orders. Thus, in 1909 there was just one Marian with full rights still residing in the Marijampole monastery. In that same year, Bl. George Matulaitis-Matulewicz made his vows and then, in time, completed the renovation of the Congregation. In this manner God led the Marians through death and gave them a new life.

On June 28, 1987, Fr. George Matulaitis-Matulewicz was beatified in Rome, and on September 17, 2007 – Fr. Papczyński in Lichen. There is no doubt that God has foreseen and planned for this timing as the most favorable for the Marians and the whole world. The prophetic ties that Fr. Papczyński established between the Congregation and the mystery of the Immaculate Conception of the Most B.V.M., the emphasis on praying for the deceased, and assisting the pastors – all this has to enliven and ignite us anew today. In the present times, when a battle to preserve human dignity from the moment of conception until natural death is being fought in the world, God makes us see an even greater perspective through our Blessed Founder's message. Today, when the world is calling for Divine Mercy, we rediscover anew that the Immaculate Conception of Mary is the first fruit of the Paschal Mystery of Christ, The Divine Mercy. The mystery of the Immaculate Conception convinces us and provides assurance that we all have been wanted and loved by God even before the creation of the world. It gives us hope that we, too, attain the forgiveness of sins thanks to the Divine Mercy, and that, in the example of Mary, we may become new creatures, thanks to the gratuitous grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ. The invitation to pray for the deceased indicates once more that everyone is destined for heaven. Imitating Fr. Papczyński today through and in the power of Jesus Christ, toiling for the Church on pilgrimage here on earth, we ought to support the Church undergoing the purification in Purgatory, so that we all – living and deceased – may become part of the Church triumphant in heaven. *Pro Cristo et Ecclesia*, as our Blessed Renovator would say.

God has been guiding the history of our Congregation from the moment of conceiving it in the eternity, through its calling into existence over 300 years ago, through its renovation 100 years ago, today and into eternity. He has been present in every moment, in every circumstance of the entire Congregation, its individual communities and members. Sometimes we wonder at the roads on which the Lord leads us; sometimes we rebel; sometimes we do not believe in His presence and grace. We have a different idea of what is good and bad for us. However, God is the Lord of history, the Lord of life of each one of us, of each of our communities and of the entire Congregation. May we learn to always recognize His loving presence. May we always discern His will and seek nothing else but to fulfill it. Glory to God for ever and ever. Amen.

Fr. Pawel Naumowicz, MIC
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QUESTIONS (for communal or individual reflection)

1. What analogies to biblical characters and to Jesus Christ Himself are to be found in the life of the Congregation or in my life?
2. In what events from the life of Blessed Father Founder and the entire Congregation am I most convinced of the Divine presence and the Divine guidance in the history of the Marians?
3. In what events of my own life (joyous, sad, or difficult) do I see Divine guidance and grace?
4. In what moments of my personal and communal life am I able to unite most closely with Jesus Christ and His Pascal Mystery today?