

LAUDATIO FR. SHAY CULLEN SSC

Rolduc, Friday November 17th 2018

Before I offer you my most heartfelt congratulation I would first like to revisit one year in the very distant past. No, I am not referring to the year you arrived in the Philippines, almost half a century ago, nor to the one almost ten years before that when you started your religious life while still in your early twenties. In that year you entered the Society of Saint Columban. But I would go still further back in history. The spiritual family you joined, takes its name and its patronage from Columban, a man known for being an untiring and courageous missionary. Taking us back to the year 543, tradition tells us that “your” Columban was born in Ireland, somewhere in the stunning spacious landscape of the Green Island. That very same year, 543, though, is also considered to be the one during which “our” saint Benedict, the founder of the Benedictine order, died at Monte Cassino right in the center of Italy. We could surmise that the very moment when the flame of the monastic figure of saint Benedict dimmed, another light was lit in another place of this world: the light of saint Columban. This evening, here in Rolduc, we could say that Martin Buber brings together saint Benedict and saint Columban as “you and I”, “ich und Du”. Saint Benedict greets, embraces, congratulates saint Columban. A circle of fifteen centuries is closed.

Imagine what Benedict would have said to Columban if they could have met one another during their lifespan. Which words would an Italian monk have addressed to his Irish brother missionary? One was used to being cloistered whereas the other travelled through large parts of Europe where he founded monasteries, played an active role in politics and spoke into the context of the Frankish Kingdom - a territory that has as its center precisely this region of the Euregio? I tend to think that Benedict would have acknowledged and confirmed in Columban the fundamental motive of his own life, that of following Jesus, be it in a particularly specific way. He would have rejoiced in the missionary strength exhibited by Columban as it had its power drawn from, and its passion embedded in, the Gospel. Benedict the monk and Columban the apostle had complementary ideals. Benedict wanted his monasteries to be places of peace, the same peace hidden in the first letter of the famous institution of Fr. Shay, PREDA (**P**eace, before **R**ecovery, **E**mpowerment,

Development, Assistance). So, for Benedict and Columban encountering one another would have been a deeply moving and affective experience of reciprocal identification.

But let us put all fanciful reflections aside and look at the facts. Recently pope Francis addressed the participants of a Congress in the following way: *Scripture tells us that man and woman are created by God in his own image. Could any more forceful statement be made about our human dignity? The Gospel speaks to us of the affection with which Jesus welcomes children; he takes them in his arms and blesses them (cf. Mk 10:16), because "it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs" (Mt 19:14). Jesus' harshest words are reserved for those who give scandal to the little ones: "It were better for them to have a great millstone fastened around their neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea" (Mt 18:6). It follows that we must work to protect the dignity of minors, gently yet firmly, opposing with all our might the throwaway culture nowadays that is everywhere apparent, to the detriment especially of the weak and the most vulnerable, such as minors (to the participants in the Congress on "Child dignity in the Digital World", Friday, 6 October 2017).*

These are words, dear Fr. Shay, which could have been yours. They express the most profound concern of your heart, the clearest and efficacious essence of your calling for almost 50 years. You have committed your life to the liberation, the protection and promotion of children's rights in the Philippines. In particular, you have been *striving at many levels to combat the brutal violations of children's rights that occur when children are subjected to sexual abuse [cf. nomination letter for the 2017 Nobel Peace Prize]. Your commitment to protect the dignity and rights of children is a perfect actual contemporary way to respond to the Gospel of Jesus Christ: "What you did for the least of my brothers and sisters, you did it for me. In an exemplary way you have been engaged in this field of action, in tender affection for all those children. They need our respect, but also our care and affection, so that they can grow and achieve all their rich potential.*

The difficulties you encountered in your fight to rescue children, minors and women from the hand of their abusers, are unimaginable to most of us. Social structures, governmental laws, international sex-mafias, personal enmities and blank opposition were and still are trying to stop your effective actions and your fearless protest. In the hundred years of its existence the Columban Society has known at least seven members who have given their life as martyrs and thus as strong witnesses of hope, faith and love. The possibility that you might arrive at such a

destiny yourself is not absent from your life either. Your fight for justice however is irresistible and this has been true from the very beginning. Arriving in the Philippines in 1969, you saw the distress of children, minors and women and without any hesitation you devoted your life as a Columban missionary to the immense work of *putting an end to “the abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children”*, long before this was set as one of the most important goals by the United Nations in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Target 16.2).

Pope Francis states: *To have children looking into our eyes is an experience we all can have and should have. It touches our hearts and requires us to examine our consciences. What are we doing to ensure that those children can continue to smile at us, with clear eyes and faces filled with trust and hope? What are we doing to make sure that they are not robbed of this light, to ensure that those eyes will not be darkened and corrupted by the malignity of men? What are we doing to restore the dignity of thousands of children and women? And even, I like to add: what can we do to help the addicted themselves? The sex-workers, the corrupted, those who are terribly entangled in the structures of sin and crime? What is hindering us to meet any other human being, saint or sinner, as a child of God? What prevents us from practicing what Martin Buber called the true relationship between you and I? Dear Fr. Shay, I most wholeheartedly thank you for your decisive and impressive example. Your life has been such that you discovered the ‘you’ in your children and that you were able to act in accordance to this. In this way, you yourself became an true ‘I’. It has confirmed your identity as a great son of Saint Columban - a true and loving human person.*

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