The World Community for Christian Meditation

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# Tablet - August 2009

## "Mumbai"

Mumbai, cloudy and oppressive in the monsoon felt like London, but clammy with the heat. Showers were short but frequent and unpredictable. Sitting in an open motor rickshaw, cheaper than the aircon taxis and more agile in negotiating the traffic, made you feel closer to real life on the streets but could also get you instantly and totally drenched. Entering an air-conditioned building in wet clothes made matters worse. I was told in reply that they liked the monsoon weather, cooler than the 40+ degree temperatures of high summer and giving the water so desperately needed for city reservoirs and prayed for by the farmers. For them the problem was that it was only drizzle compared with the downpours needed. I stopped complaining.

At the home for the mentally and physically handicapped that I was visiting, a determined and effective founder, and an Indian woman not surprisingly, had made something remarkable happen. It was both a well-run and compassionate response to at least part of one aspect of the teeming problems of this city of 13.6 million souls, the second largest in the world after Shanghai. As we entered one young student came up and sat beside us, looking sad and anxious for an excuse to avoid going into class. His teacher discovered him, and he was gently teased and led back.

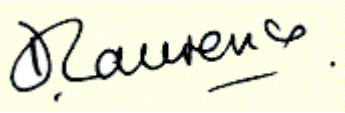
The teachers and volunteers in the classrooms we visited seemed prayerful. There was the other-centredness that makes for prayer and they were inwardly centred in the patient attention they gave to their small number of slow-learning students. Not well-paid financially they were rewarded by the gradual progress they saw in those they taught. All the children were in school uniform which hid the difference between those from rich families and the many who came in daily from the slums. A shared handicap can dissolve many barriers including the virus of snobbery. It was not an overtly religious place but it had the genuine sense of the sacred, the grace that always moves among the wounded in the presence of compassion.

One volunteer, a strikingly handsome young man with an outgoing charm that came with the looks, was very popular with the children. Surprisingly, he seemed to relate to them more as

an elder brother than a teacher. He came in several times a week because he was unemployed. He did whatever he was asked, except to teach from books, because he himself could neither read nor write. He was not the idle rich kid with an expensive haircut but no job that he might seem. He said he had come to Mumbai from a tribal village to seek his fortune. He aspired to be an actor. He lived in a single room with a few fellow hopefuls, watching films, telling stories of lucky breaks. His secret handicap was also his great fear. Even if he got a part how could he avoid eventually being exposed? He would not be stopped from walking into the best hotel and for the time being his face was his fortune; but he could not sign the register or read the menu.

Disadvantage comes in many disguises and the poor we will always have with us. Those who have not, even what they think they have will be taken from them. The degrees of poverty and the bridgeability of the gap between the extremes all need to be assessed. But who can really count how many people fall off a social radar if they were never on it and when there are no safety nets? In so many developing countries the ancient poverty of the streets and slums seems the more obscene, of course, because of the extravagance of the wealthy. But what also shocks is the lack of anger. Maybe it's the belief in karma, as we are told. Or perhaps the poor need the fantasy lifestyles of the rich and famous, the new pantheon of the screen stars, as an imaginary escape from the degrading realities of their life. Simone Weil thought that daydreaming is the root of all evil; but she also saw that it was the 'sole consolation of the afflicted'.

Maybe providing that false consolation makes the uber-wealthy feel better. By living so fantastically they feel they are making the daily drudge of the poor a little easier. The same argument justifies building great temples and marble pillared churches or record-breaking Buddha statues near the slums and favellas so easily swept away by a monsoon burst. The unfairness of life is always hard to contemplate. What makes it easier is not Bollywood or religious fantasy but the reality of one handicapped person helping another, the being open about one's shame, the emergence of grace through a wound.



Laurence Freeman OSB

*Laurence Freeman is a Benedictine monk of the Congregation of Monte Oliveto and also Director of The World Community for Christian Meditation (www.wccm.org)*

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