

SEND ME

📍 HERE I AM

community
RETREAT

INTRODUCTION

This retreat falls in the year and month in which we commemorate the 150th anniversary of the death of our Founder. October is also, for the Church, "mission month". The theme that frames the World Mission Day and Missionary October 2020 is taken from the Prophet Isaiah: "Here I am, send me". As we will see, it is the same phrase with which Claret identified the reason for his missionary commitment. Those five words catapulted that irresistible impulse from his childhood in Sallent to his deathbed in Fontfroide. How will this energetic phrase affect today an elderly missionary, or a student, or a lay Claretian if these reflections reach him? Will it wake up those sleeping, move the paralyzed, spur on the mediocre? Will it help those who are in crisis? In such diverse personal situations, how will the power of these words stir them? We are not forgetting the cruel threat of the pandemic, which is undoubtedly also a scenario and occasion of special requirements for us.

Faith is not reduced to listening to God and responding to him. From the day of Creation, he, who needs nothing from anyone, wanted to count on mankind's collaboration for almost everything. And he began by leaving it in our hands to complete the work of Creation and everything that would happen on earth. That is why he did not create us as mere passive receivers of his voice, but also as active transmitters. He made us capable of receiving, but also of giving. In the "Anthology of Nonsense" a young man says that "faith is what God gives us so that we can understand the priests". Joking aside, faith is what God gives us to fight for, not to lull us to sleep, but to spur us on. As we will repeat here, our faith moves forward if it reacts to lazy inertia and rushes to make itself available to God. This is what our Retreat is about.

We will first review the words in their prophetic biblical context and then we will explore them in the experience of our Founder, allowing ourselves to be reached and transformed by their vigorous dynamism. It will be a good tribute to his personality in this unique year. Some brief suggestions for personal or community prayer are offered in the course of the reflection.



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LECTIO: The account of a vision (Isaiah 6, 1-8)

The inspiring phrase that concerns us is found at the end of the account of Isaiah's vocation in the sixth chapter of his book. Let us read that story to put it in context and understand it better:

"In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and exalted, the train of his robe filling the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. And they cried out to one another, 'Holy, holy, holy, the Lord Almighty, the earth is full of his glory! And the thresholds of the doors shook at the sound of His voice, and the temple was filled with smoke. I said, "Woe is me, I am lost! I, a man of unclean lips who dwells among a people of unclean lips, have seen with my eyes the King and Lord Almighty. And one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal in his hand, which he had taken from the altar with tongs; he put it to my mouth and said to me: Look: this has touched your lips, your guilt is gone, your sin is forgiven. Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, who will go on our behalf?' I answered, "Here I am, send me". [Isaiah 6, 1-8].

We are faced with one of the most impressive and profound pages of the Old Testament. What details stand out especially? Let us focus at least on these:

The historical framework. Isaiah places this autobiographical episode in 739 BC, the year of the death of King Uzziah, the last great king of the southern kingdom. He had ruled the kingdom of Judah for 52 years. During his reign and according to God's promise, the nation had been blessed with times of prosperity. On the death of the monarch, things were to change for the worse.

The scene. The events took place in the sacred setting of the temple. One day, while praying there, Isaiah was struck by a strong commotion. If we look at the terms of the story carefully, it is not really a calling, but rather a legitimisation of his prophetic mission. Isaiah is not called directly, but it is he who offers himself as an instrument in God's hands.

A personal experience told in a metaphorical way. There are some experiences of life that can be told in words; others cannot. Emotions, feelings, or spiritual experiences are not easy to describe. This time, Isaiah uses images to tell his story. It would be naive to interpret it literally. God, in fact, has no need to sit down or cover himself with a cloak to protect himself from the cold, nor to be assisted by seraphim as if they were his bodyguards. What Isaiah narrates is not an apparition but an inner experience in the form of a vision.

The literary structure of the story. Built with fine artistry, it records a vision of God and the purification of the prophet. Both serve as an introduction to the subsequent colloquy during which Isaiah makes his offering and receives a disconcerting divine commission (vv.9-13). What do the first eight verses tell us?

- **A vision of God** (vv 1-4), framed by an earthquake that shakes the whole Temple and fills it with smoke. In the midst of such a marvel, Isaiah is overwhelmed before the Most High, the Lord of the universe, who has his throne in the heavens and is assisted by seraphim who sing incessantly: "Holy, Holy, Holy". So shaken is Isaiah that the hair on his body stands on end, sensing his tragedy ("I am lost") because he assumes that no one can see God and still be alive.
- **The purification of the prophet** (vv 5-7). As soon as he comes into contact with the Lord, Isaiah dramatically experiences his weakness and unworthiness. How can he, a man of unclean lips, stand before the thrice-holy God? The Lord, however, carries out his work of salvation through weak and sinful men, whom he rehabilitates. Hence a seraph with a burning ember touches his lips, purifying and cancelling out his iniquity. Thus, it is not that Isaiah's lips are already pure, but "your guilt is gone, your sin is forgiven" (v. 7).

This unprecedented healing leads him to see things differently. He is no longer crushed by the majesty of God, nor is he annulled like an impotent worm. The vision of God's glory gives rise to a strong impulse to volunteer before God asks him to do so. Thus, he is introduced to his disconcerting plans for his rebellious people.





• **The offering for an unknown mission** (v. 8). It is surprising that the "Almighty" shows himself so "powerless" in the face of the evils of the people that he asks for help. The question Isaiah hears is generic, not directly personal: Who will I send? Who will go on our behalf? And it is also surprising that the voice of the Lord does not indicate what is the problem to be solved or the need to be attended to. But it makes him react quickly and unpredictably: without resistance or conditions, Isaiah offers himself to God. He does not know what he is offering or where he will be sent. It is the absolute availability to God's service. His answer is not "I am going", but "send me". How does this attitude contrast with Jeremiah's timid resistance (Jer 1:6) or Moses' obstinate one (Ex 4:10)! On the other hand, how it resembles Abraham's readiness (Gen 12:1-4) or, in a special way, Mary's Fiat (Lk 1:18)!

God accepts Isaiah's offer at once and, only later, indicates to him the mission -very strange indeed- that he must carry out: to provoke the hardening of the people, so that they will not be converted and healed (v. 9-10). We leave here unaddressed the problem that opens this disconcerting mission, which is always for the good of the people, even if appearances contradict this.

• **The formula: "Hinni!"**. Isaiah makes his own the very bold formula of offering: Hinni. This Hebrew word, precise and winged, is composed of "hinne(h)" - a particle of intense demonstrative force that responds to the image of a finger pointing at the object - and the suffix "ni", which represents the first person singular pronoun.

When God addresses a friend, the latter, taking in his hands all the fullness of personality of his "I", resolutely responds: "Here you have me entirely. Hinni! Ecce ego! Here I am!". Like Mary of Nazareth: "Here I am, the handmaid of the Lord: let what you say be done to me..." (Lk 1:38). Or like Jesus, when he embraced his vocation as Saviour: "Here I am, to do your will, O God!" (Heb 10:7).

To think about:

after reading the biblical text and commentary, ask yourself:
why did Isaiah have this reaction. ¿Where did it come from?

¹ In Latin: "Ecce ego!" In English it is usually translated "Here I am".



MEDITATIO: Claretian echoes

After the *lectio*, the experience of Fr. Claret in his Autobiography, which has a foundational value for his missionaries, helps us for the *meditatio*. The missionary life of our Founder was based on a firm, unshakable certainty that he himself describes: "I was convinced of the need for the missionary to be sent to bear fruit" (Aut. 192). His words show the criterion from which he acted throughout his life: "I knew that the missionary must never interfere; he must offer himself to the bishop; he must say: *Ecce ego, mitte me*"² (Aut 195). We find there the motto of Isaiah, which our Founder made his own; it is the golden thread that, as we shall see, will successively unite the beads of the rosary of his history, giving coherence and meaning to his apostolic life.

1. Everything begins from childhood...

Christian life begins with a story of encounter with God. It is attributed to the writer Gabriel García Márquez that the times really lived are not the chronological ones, but those of which the heart keeps memory. Our Founder kept in his memory this anecdote from his childhood that we need to remember. He speaks of his encounters with the Lord in this indelible scene from his childhood: "When there were hardly any people left in the Church, I would return and talk with the Lord by myself" (Aut 40). What happened to him in those times of solitude with the Lord? As the saint says, he spoke to him with faith, trust and love to with his whole being: "I offered myself a thousand times to his holy service" (Aut 40). This early and insistent oblation was to mark his whole life. A vital passion ignited him in love, illuminated his intelligence and projected his whole being towards an unsuspected and open future. He offered himself to "be doing the things of the Father" for the good of the people. Those Eucharistic visits transformed him, as when an unconscious body regains consciousness, as when a city in blackout regains light. The walls of the parish church in Sallent would be the mute witnesses of God's passage through his childish soul already filled with impatience.

Imagine how those conversations went... what did Jesus and the boy Claret talk about... why did they end in an offering to the service of God?

²"Here I am, send me" (Is 6,8).



2. His personal fragility was never an obstacle

Neither in the Bible nor in life do people appear without stain, resistance or defects. Perfect beings neither exist nor did they exist. It is true that the Bible presents Abraham and, above all, Mary as models of an immediate and unconditional "yes" to God. But it also contains the memory of many other characters who resisted it. Without Moses, Jeremiah, Jonah, Job, Elijah, Peter and many others, something as important as the difficulty of the journey from "no" to "amen" would be missing.

Anthony Claret was no exception. He also passed his own period of distraction and cooling off during his first years as a student in Barcelona. As he himself says: "during almost four years, having cooled down enough in the fervour and filled too much of the wind of vanity, of praise and applause, particularly in the first three years" (Aut 82).

And together with other very adverse circumstances, such as bad friendships, or the experience of the evil and dangers of the world, it was the word of God that tore him away from the love of production (cf. Aut 66) that had numbed him. It happened in the interior of his conscience in the church of Saints Justo and Pastor. Only he knew then. What had happened to him? He himself acknowledges that "the fervour of piety and devotion was awakened in me," says the Saint, "and I opened my eyes and knew the dangers through which I had passed in body and soul" (Aut. 70). That clear purification left him "disappointed, annoyed and bored with the world" (Aut. 77) and moved him to "give God a hand". Thus his resistance became "amen". And he understood that the omnipotence of God and his weakness, together, were more than enough to fix the world.

We cannot thank him enough for these confessions about how he was weakened by the delirium of production or influenced by friendships and life's worries. God counts on human beings, not perfect machines. How much good it can do us to know "the faults of the saints"!

For analysis:

Internal criticism is usually a handicap for commitment... it creates many complexes that restrain our desire to do good... Do you recognize in yourself an excessive self-criticism that discourages and paralyzes you?

3. The essentials of his daring

From the onslaught of God, Claret had to surrender; there was no alternative. His surrender was nothing cowardly, besides daring, it was consistent and definitive. From then on, he would not take a backward step. What do we find at the root of this powerful choice? If we could dissect it with a scalpel, we would find in it three unavoidable ingredients: *love, abandonment and freedom*. With them he kneaded the Eucharistic bread of his apostolic zeal and became an apt instrument for the service of God. This was his style of living, his true identity, as Francisco Aguilar, the first biographer of Claret, left us in an insuperable phrase: "He was an apostle before he was a man"³.

His determination recalls the parallel case of Ety Hillesum, the young Jewish girl who ended up in a Nazi crematorium. This believing woman left us in the last notes of her diary: "If God stops helping me, it will be me who will have to help God... It seems to me more and more clear, with each beat of my heart, that you, my God, cannot help us, but that it is up to us to help you and to defend to the end the protective dwelling that you have in us".

- **It was an expression of love, not of fear.** The saint expresses this clearly: "With what faith, what trust and what love I spoke to the Lord, to my good Father" (Aut 40). God was his "good Father" whom he was to serve and whose will was the ultimate reference point. He understood that the best thing about God was not that he was omnipotent, but that he was not too omnipotent and that God "would need" people. His "good Father" was clever enough to know better than anyone else that omnipotence is admired, respected, venerated, creates wonder, admiration, submission. But that only

³ Vida del Exmo e Illmo. Sr. D. Antonio Maria Claret, Madrid, 1871, p. 15.



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weakness, proximity creates love. From there, Claret will conceive his life as an effort so that this "good Father", so concerned about his sons and daughters, may be known, loved and served by all. Any reserve and inhibition for him would be tantamount to blasphemy.

- **It was also an expression of trust, not apathy.** Claret himself testifies to it: *"I remember that I said to him: Humanly speaking, I see no hope at all, but you are so powerful that if you want to, you will arrange everything. And I remember that with all confidence I left myself in his divine hands, hoping that he would arrange what was to be done, as indeed he did, as I will say later"* (Aut. 40). It was not a matter of working at a thousand tasks but of trusting in God, "like a child in its mother's arms" (Ps 130). This freed him from neutrality, disinterest or coldness in the face of God's workings and the complications of life. Hanging on to the providence of his "good Father", Claret knew how to interpret what was happening to him: *"The Lord was taking me further to wean me from the things of the world, and thus, detached from all of them, I would remain in the clerical state as the Lord has later made me understand"* (Aut. 93).

- It was, as well, an expression of freedom, not of submission. The observance of the Lord's will was always for Claret a free and spontaneous decision. Free too, but sweetly moved, as a child is led by the loving hand of the mother. He was led by the hand, as it were. God's will was not the cage of his freedom, but his nourishment. He voluntarily renounced his own will for that of the "good Father". He let God do it, without cancelling out himself. He authorized him to act in his life, as he declared in many of his testimonies: *"Oh, my Lord and my Father, I desire nothing more than to know your most holy will in order to fulfil it, I want nothing more than to love you with all fervour and serve you with all fidelity.* (Aut. 136).

- **And it was a permanent attitude, not transitory.** We cannot provide here a complete list of the times in which Claret left a record of this unchanging readiness. They are innumerable. Let us remember, for example, how his dedication to God's plans led him to such difficult decisions as disobeying his father for the first time because he was entirely available⁴; or as clean as when he confessed that he neither sought to be perfect nor aspired to his personal salvation, but was only moved by the love and greater good of others⁵; or when he placed on his episcopal shield⁶ what had always warmed his apostolic heart; or when he ardently revealed his only claim: to obey God⁷. We would not finish mentioning such citations. His faith did not seek flavours or feelings of well-being; it was a fundamental experience⁸.

For prayer:
 Stop for a while to ask God for his love, protection from fear and freedom...
 With few words. Many times

4. Running risks and mortal dangers

Throwing oneself into God's hands is often very dangerous. Claret sensed this very early on. Far from any idealism, already in his years as a priest in Sallent he saw things like this: *"I felt a great desire to go to the missions to save souls, even if I had to undergo a thousand tasks, even if I had to suffer death for it"* (Aut 112). And he experienced this, even with unusual harshness, throughout his apostolic life. Offering himself to God did not bring him any advantages or exemptions. He did not find a pre-determined plan to follow or a programme to fulfil: the only thing that kept him going was the desire of a

⁴ As he recalls in his Autobiography: *"I had never really opposed my father's wishes and it was because the will of God wanted me to do something else, he wanted me to be an ecclesiastic and not a manufacturer, even though I did not know it or think about it at the time"* (Aut. 64).

⁵ *"From the time when the desire to become a Carthusian passed, which God had given me to tear myself away from the world, I thought not only of sanctifying my soul, but also of thinking continuously what I would do and how I would do it to save the souls of my neighbours. To that end, I prayed to Jesus and Mary, and offered myself continually to this same objective."* (Aut. 113).

⁶ *"The love of Christ urges me on, impels me, makes me run from one town to another, forces me to shout"* (Aut. 212).

⁷ *"I do not seek, Lord, nor do I want to know anything other than your most holy will to fulfill it, and to fulfill it, Lord, with all perfection"* (Aut 445).



good Father "on our behalf" (Rom 8:31) who wants his children to live. But that did not remove the possibility of failure, of frustration, of misfortune...

The worries and burdens of every day, so human as eating or dressing or so apostolic as getting resources to publish books or suitable people to continue his missionary projects, were not dispelled. Nor did the sufferings that come with living coherently in the midst of a hostile world that tried to eliminate the Gospel and the Church at any cost disappear. But, above all, "death was kept alive" (either caused by nature or by assassins) which made him live a very high risk from attacks and persecutions included. Such an atmosphere could have been so unbearable that it ended up making him cynical, apathetic or violent before such a threatening and dark God. He was never like that. He lived grafted onto Christ.

For prayer:

Acknowledge your apostolic sufferings (displeasures, tasks, rejections, misunderstandings, ingratitude...). Tell God who listens to you about them. Then he speaks to you.

5. With a cordi-marian seal

During his Roman period in the Jesuit Novitiate, Claret wrote some prayers to Mary. In one of them, and with an exalted tone, reflecting the romantic taste of the time, he declared to the Virgin Mary his dedication as a son and missionary. Paraphrased with the vehemence of a zeal that tried to embrace the whole world, that prayer gave voice to his soul. His apostolic, sincere, passionate, universal love was emerging: *"My Mother, what is missing? Do you want an instrument to help you to remedy such a great evil? Here you have one, and while he is known to be the most vile and despicable, he considers himself the most useful to this end... Come, loving Mother, let us not waste time; here I am, dispose of me; you know that I am all yours"* (Aut. 156). Adding with fervour: *"Send me and you will see how they are converted"* (Aut 160); *"I offer myself as an instrument of their conversion"* (Aut 161).

Although reworked, we Claretians keep this prayer as a precious treasure. It is the *filial and apostolic prayer to the Heart of Mary*, which was previously incorrectly called *the filial consecration to the Heart of Mary*. When we pray it, we recognize and accept the spiritual motherhood of Mary that configures us to Christ the missionary (cf. CC 8). We are sons of the Heart of Mary, being sent.

Let us not stop praying with that very apostolic and Marian formula. It re-creates us. When we pray it, we place ourselves under the intercession and protection of Mary as her children so that, in the strength of the Spirit, she may configure us with Christ the evangelizer, teach us to keep the Word, and infuse us with love and joy. By telling our Mother three times "Behold your son", our availability is stimulated and our trust is activated. We pray for her motherly protection which forms, sends, speaks and loves through us and, in particular, keeps us from everything that might exclude us from the Kingdom.

Through the Heart of Mary, the Spirit prevents us from forgetting who we are, where we come from and where we are going. Surrendering ourselves means placing everything we are and have at the service of the Lord and under the protective gaze of our Mother. Our prayer is addressed to God with the mediation of the heart of a Mother who wants the best for her children. There is no more precious good than union with God. Only from it can we build a world in harmony with nature and in universal brotherhood. Therefore, we must ask our Mother without fail to be faithful to our roots with this filial and apostolic prayer.

For prayer:

Recite very slowly the filial and apostolic prayer to the Heart of Mary.



Send me



Prayer: Send me.

[To be recited together at the beginning or end of the community meeting]

Send me without fear, I am willing.
Don't give me time to make up excuses,
nor allow me to try to negotiate with you.
Send me, I am willing.
Place in my path peoples, lands,
stories, injured lives, thirsty for you.
Don't accept a no for an answer.
Send me to my own and to others,
to those near and to those far away,
to those who know you
and to those who only dream of you,
and put into my hands your tact that heals,
on my lips your seductive word;
in my actions your humanity that saves;
in my faith the certainty of your Gospel.
Send me, with so many others who, each day,
convert the world into a miracle.

[José Ma Rodríguez Olaizola, sj]

