

Citizens of the World—Servants of Christ By Maylanne Whittall

We have all been travelling long distances to get here, and I'd like to begin my remarks with a journey image, a reflection by Dom Helder Camara.

Setting out in first of all getting out of oneself. Breaking through the shell of selfishness hardening us within our own ego. To stop revolving round oneself as if we were the centre of everything. Refusing to be ringed in by the problems of our own small world. However important these may be, humanity is more important and our task is to serve humanity.

Setting out is not covering miles of land or sea, or travelling faster than the speed of sound. It is first and foremost opening ourselves to other people, trying to get to know them, going out to meet them.

Opening ourselves to ideas, including those with which we disagree, this is what the good traveller should do. Happy are they who understand the words "If you disagree with me, you have something to give me."

If those who are with you always agree with you before you open your mouth, they are not companions but shadows. When disagreement is not a form of systematic blocking, when it rises from a different vision, it can only enrich us. It is possible to travel alone. But the good traveller knows that the journey is human life and life needs company. *Companion* means the one who eats the same bread. Happy are they who feel they are always on the road and that everyone they meet is their chosen companion. Good travellers take care of their weary companions. They guess when they lose heart. They take them as they find them, listen to them. Intelligently, gently, above all lovingly, they encourage them to go on and recover their joy in the journey.

To travel for the sake of travelling is not the true journey. We must seek a goal, envisage an end to the journey, an arrival.

But there are journeys and journeys. For the oppressed minorities, setting out means to get moving and help many others get moving to make the world juster and more human.

As deacons, we are on a journey. The theme of this conference, "Citizens of the World—Servants of Christ," is a signpost of where we are on that journey. For many good reasons, as individuals and as an organization, we have been concerned with our identity and status, with internal questions of canons, of the difference between deacons and priests, of title and dress, with the transitional diaconate and per saltum ordination.

But, our journey does have a goal, reflected in our theme and workshop topics. We are not primarily members of an institution. We are also members of the body of Christ, members of a society, citizens of the world, creatures of the planet earth. And as such, we go with a clear vision. We recall it every time we say the Lord's Prayer: "Thy Kingdom come . . . on earth as it is in heaven." Our goal, our point of arrival, is to build the kingdom of heaven on earth.

I have been reflecting on a much loved New Testament story as a model of servanthood. It's the one John the Evangelist uses to describe the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry—an ordinary event, a wedding where the wine runs out. I like the story, because deacons, "diakonoi" or servants, figure in it so prominently. And I think that story of the wedding in Cana has something important to tell us about what it means to be servants, what our job is, and how we relate to people.

You know the story. It begins with the arrival of Jesus and the disciples at a wedding, and Mary, who was apparently there already, observes a very obvious need: "They have no wine." Jesus says to her, "Woman, what have I to do with you? My hour is not yet come." The tone would be more like, "Mother, don't worry just yet. The moment isn't right." But she isn't put off: she tells the servants, "Whatever he tells you to do, do it." And Jesus tells them what to do—to draw water from the water jars. So they pour out the water and bring it to the governor of the feast . . . who then goes on to commend the groom for the quality of the wine! And the disciples believe. And the guests have their party.

John gives an important hint to help us understand the story. He begins by saying that it happened "on the third day." If you read the chapter before, it was probably at least the fifth day, so it was probably not referring to actual time. Clearly, the third day refers to when Jesus rose from the dead, and what John is really talking about is the resurrection, and this is a resurrection story. We have lots of examples, especially in Luke, of the wedding feast as an image of the kingdom. It's as if John was writing his gospel backwards: it begins with the kingdom and ends with the cross and resurrection. So what we're looking at here is a resurrection community, a community of new life, transformed from the old order to the new, and the servants here are the agent or enablers of transformation—transformation of water into wine, of guests who are drunk and somewhat chaotic into a community of celebration, of unbelief into belief, and ultimately of slavery, suffering and death into new life. That's our story, and that's our journey.

For where we fit in, the details of this story are interesting. It's a short drama, but there are lots of actors, and where do the servants fit in? Mary is the one who notices the need ("They have no wine"), and she is the first to speak to the servants ("Whatever he tells you to do, do it.") Jesus gives a practical, short-term order ("Draw the water from the jars"), and the servants obey. The governor of the feast is delighted, but not curious—the servants are the ones who know the source of the wine. The bridegroom is the one who gets the credit ("But you have kept the best wine until now"). The disciples observe, and believe. And the guests get to celebrate.

What does this tell us about being a servant? It tells us we may get our orders from unexpected places . . . not always the obvious ones. It was not the governor of the feast who gave the orders in this instance, but Mary, who was part of the community and saw the need. It's not necessarily the bishop or the rector of our parish who are going to be the ones who give us our orders. It tells us that by listening to others, we

become receptive to what Jesus asks of us. It tells us that we may not always have the full picture of what we do, we may not always understand or see the consequences of our action. It also tells us that we might not necessarily get credit for what we do; and that as servants, we might not even get noticed by those who benefit by what we do.

But servants, by their attentiveness, responsiveness, by their faith and obedience, are the ones who enable transformation to happen. They know their business, and that knowledge is the source of their influence and their power.

Robert Greenleaf begins his book on Servant Leadership by recalling the theme of Herman Hesse's *Journey to the East*. "In this story," he writes, "we see a band of men on a mythical journey . . ." The central figure of the story is Leo, who accompanies the party as the servant who does their menial chores, but who also sustains them with his spirit and with his song. He in a person of extraordinary presence. All goes well until Leo disappears. Then the group falls into disarray and the journey is abandoned. The narrator, one of the party, after some years of wandering, finds Leo and is taken into the order that had sponsored the journey. There he discovers that Leo, whom he had known first as servant, was in fact the titular head of the order, its guiding spirit, a great and noble leader.

Greenleaf concludes that the story clearly tells us that the great leader is seen first as servant—and that applies to us as deacons! We too are part of an order that calls us to do menial chores and to sustain people with our spirit and our song. For us to be preoccupied with our appearance as leaders in the church is to get things wrong.

Greenleaf goes on to describe some of the qualities of servanthood. Servants are people who search, who listen, who expect. They are attentive to the moment, striving always to see clearly, to hear the voice of prophecy. Servants are able to see the disparity between what is possible and what is actual, to see the possibilities of the wine of fellowship and community. They are able to see the disparity because they are the ones who pour out the water of the old order in acts of service. Our discipleship is to see beyond what is expected, to combine the analysis of the need that we see in our work ("They have no wine") with a creative and artistic response ("You have kept the good wine until now").

Servants are not primarily critics or complainers, but are affirmative builders of a better society. That's a difficult and challenging task, and certainly likely to make us the subjects of others' criticisms and complaints. The leadership of servants comes from making sure that people's highest priority needs are being served. We must always ask ourselves if those we serve, no matter how destitute or seemingly self-sufficient they seem, grow as persons, whether they are more likely themselves to become servants. Above all, servants know the goal, the vision, and command trust both by their competence and spirit. Servants, by definition, are fully human. They are closer to the ground. They're in touch with reality, they can see and hear things that others don't. They know things by virtue of their position.

Our job as servants is to make the people of God a more serving people, to make the organized church a more serving church. As deacons, we are like trustees, whose

influence is from knowing, and asking questions--hard questions, searching questions, ones that can't be answered superficially. We take our orders not primarily from the institution, but from the human context where there is need, and brokenness, and suffering. This is where being *citizens of the world* comes in and takes priority. Just as the servants at Cana listened to Mary so Jesus could act, we too must listen where others don't so the Body of Christ can be effective. So we have to ask ourselves, "What is our context? What are the prophetic voices we listen to?" These are questions for reflection and discernment that are the substance of this conference, and not ones which I would presume to answer for you. However, let me lay out some guidelines, some caveats, and some illustrations that come out of my experience.

To be attentive to our context, I think, requires three things. First, we attend to our context by listening where others don't—to children, to old people, to women, to street people, to natives, to people of colour, to the voice of emerging nations. And listening to people we don't agree with, for they have the ability to enrich our vision. This is especially hard for us as North Americans because we are blinded by the power and the affluence that is associated with our culture. It corrupts our thinking and makes us assume that our abundance and our power and our prosperity are what qualify us to be servants. Words like "pity" and "charity," which once had a rich meaning, now have a bad name. I think this is because people who are poor or handicapped or oppressed, associate pity and charity with domination and control, and the use of power over rather than with them.

In our culture and context, we have to be particularly attentive to what drives us and how we come across to those with whom we work. Once about three years ago, in preparation for the work I now do, I was involved in making a "plunge"—an experience of taking five dollars and surviving in the streets for three or four days. It's a quick, effective way of getting some sense of the perception of our services and attitudes for people who are in the streets. The first thing I needed was something to eat for lunch, and I went to a mission. The person who greeted me did not so much as look me in the face. He gave me a paper bag that had a sandwich in it. I found a bus shelter to sit down and eat it as I wasn't allowed to stay at the mission. And I guess that sandwich will always make me think of what "charity" is: it was dry, with the lowest quality meat imaginable, no butter, no mayonnaise, but an insulting blob of mustard in the middle. That 's what "charity" felt like to me.

Servanthood is not the product of prosperity. It is just the other way around. It's what leads to fullness of life. The abundant life, healing, wholeness are the result, the outcome of transforming service and not the point of departure. The first thing we have to do then, in being attentive to our context, is to listen. I think that kind of listening is what calls us out from where we are, from what is comfortable and normal for us. So a second guideline is what Henri Nouwen and the other authors of *Compassion* call "voluntary displacement." The network that I'm involved with in Toronto has called itself the *Single Displaced Persons Project*—it was partly taking postwar language in recognition that the most oppressed people by our social system were people who were not just poor, but who were also without community—who were displaced. Their

displacement is not voluntary. But in order to be with them, we can choose to displace ourselves from that which is comfortable, familiar, and normal. It's a characteristic of service to take on other people's agenda and to make them our own. But even as we do this, we must realize that we can easily be tempted to listen and to talk about the people whom we serve but not to trust them.

Another illustration that is powerful to me: in Toronto there is a group that in trying to attend to the health needs of people in the street which are not being met by hospital emergency wards or by traditional medical services. One of the exciting things about this ministry is that the people who are involved in running the service, who are on the board and who are the decision-makers, are not primarily doctors and nurses, but people who are using the services themselves. It's been an amazing lesson for volunteer nurses who give their time to this clinic. They have found that what's probably even more important than medical care is the beginning of building trust.

One story that really struck me is a nurse who was speaking with a man who came to the clinic and who had a very visible and ugly cut in his ankle—a festering wound in which his sock had become embedded. She was quite concerned and appalled by that, but that's not what he wanted treated. He wanted something else to be treated—a headache. That was what he wanted, and that is what he came for. And she said, "I have a real need to attend to this wound." He said, "No, that's not what I'm here for." And she had to pull back all of her professional expertise and inclinations, in order that trust could be built. Now there's more to the story. . . I think eventually the man did come back and have his wound treated, but this first visit was a testing of trust.

In a workshop we had recently, some of the participants in the Street Health clinic were involved in some long-range planning. I had them draw visions of what they liked about the service and what was unique about it and special to them. I divided them into groups of nurses and AIDS workers and actual users. And the most wonderful drawing came out of the users of the service themselves. It showed was a great circle—an image, they said, of the continuation of this program—surrounded with faces of everyone they knew from the streets and from their society who was involved in the system. At the centre of the circle was a kind of cartoon dialogue between a nurse and a street person. The nurse was saying to a person who had come to the door, "What can I do to help?" And the street person's answer was, "I don't know." And the nurse said the second time around, "What can I do to help? I care." And the answer of the street person in the second frame was, "At last, someone who cares for me. But why?" So clearly the image of the Street Health clinic was above all an image where people felt trust. But in order to build that trust, we have to displace ourselves, and put ourselves into situations of discomfort, of unfamiliarity.

The third guideline for attending to our context in the ability, the strength, and the willingness, to make ourselves inconspicuous, to leave room for God to act, to avoid creating dependency, to recognize our self-interest, our need as well as those we serve, to be healed. Being inconspicuous doesn't mean to disappear. If we think that we're not there, we're not taking into account our own power in the relationship. It

means that we put ourselves into a minus situation, so that others might grow and God can act.

There are, in our tradition and culture, and in the life of our church, some very significant blocks that I want to address, that prevent us from listening, from displacing ourselves, and from putting ourselves in inconspicuous or minus situations.

One, is that we live in a culture of social segregation. When I go to work every day on the bus, I sit and I look at the ads on the top part of the bus, and all of them show white, healthy, middle class people doing various things to advertise the product. And when I lower my eyes and see who's sharing the seats on that bus, there are people who are black, people who come from India or Pakistan, there are people from Asian backgrounds, there are people who are poor, there are people who are of native origin. Our dominant culture does not reflect the reality of the people who make up our community.

Another disparity is that when I go to church on Sunday, the faces are almost all like mine. And everything in our culture contributes to that. Our housing, our neighbourhoods are designed for privacy and segregation. So that's a block we have to be aware of. If we are part of communities that are made up of people that are just like us, we have to ask ourselves what we are being called to.

Another block is the emphasis that is very predominant in our pastoral care education on individual care, on one-to-one counselling, on a therapeutic and case-management approach. These are important responses, but they are not enough. They do not heed the root cause of people's condition. I was very struck by a colleague of mine who had her training in social work and who began work in a group home for psychiatric patients. She said she was interested in Jungian psychology. The question she put to her first client was "How do you feel?" and the person's response was "I feel hungry." That was the beginning of an amazing transformation process for this person, because she realized that by offering care to someone whose systemic problem was not having enough food to eat was somewhat like asking someone how they feel, offering them pastoral care, when they're being pinned down by a truck. Pastoral care is important, and there are people in our church who are well trained in that, but if we're going to be agents of transformation, we have to look at what's holding people down, to work with others to lift up the truck.

If we're going to make the church a servant church, we have to look at a different emphasis. It's not the emphasis that we all take for granted on the nature and existence of God: this is what theologians occupy themselves with. But another emphasis, and that which is specifically and emphatically ours as deacons, is the realization that the real crisis is the existence and nature of human beings. Through involvement with the poor, with people who are oppressed, with those whom our society and culture are marginalizing, we come to understand God and Jesus the poor servant. We do not flee the world as a mystic community that is cut off from the world, and we don't preach to the world, as if we are the ones who have the answers. As servants of transformation, we take the incarnation seriously, we recognize that here and now has priority, we acknowledge creation as good.

Finally, I want to address some of the skills that we need if we are to be servants, if we are to overcome these blocks . . . and I don't think these are skills that you learn at seminary, or even at deacons' schools. They're skills that you take on slowly, in community, as part of your practice.

First of all, as I've already said, we need to be critically aware of our context, to start with our world citizenship. We need, of course, to be skilled in human relations--in communication, in listening, in diagnosing need not apart from, but together with others, not as experts, but in dialogue with those whom we are concerned about, not as rescuing angels, but as partners.

As agents of transformation, we need to be knowledgeable about institutions and organizations. We need to understand how they work, we need to realize that these can be the vehicles of oppression or transformation. If we don't know how they work, we can't help to make the difference.

As agents of transformation, we need to learn how to do social analysis, to observe systems and structures of the economic, social, political, and religious aspects of our society. We need to be astute politicians. This is a complex and difficult task, but an absolutely vital one if our actions are to be part of a liberating and transformative process, and not merely aspirin solutions which reinforce existing structures.

I want to give you an illustration—one you may have heard of before, but it bears repeating. It has to do with a woman who is standing on the bank of a river, and sees someone drowning. She takes off her jacket, and she jumps in and she saves the person. A few minutes later, someone else is drowning, and she does the same thing. A crowd starts to gather. And this happens a few more times. But when the fourth person that she sees comes along, she puts her jacket back on, and goes away! Those who were standing by in admiration and fascination said, "Where are you going? You can't leave these people to drown!" And she said, "I'm going up the river to see who's throwing them in."

We have to look beyond the external signs, and see the structures and the cause of what we're doing is, and that's where we have to address the problem. But it's a journey that we cannot possibly do alone, in isolation, as individuals. It has to be done with others, in community. So we have to be skilled at building networks, at building links with people who have the same commitments and concerns that we do, and not to worry about people who don't agree with us. They're the ones who are looking on, they're the ones who want to see what we can do. It's scary and it's risky, and it's very challenging. But it can be done, especially if it's done in the context of community.

We have lots of food banks in Canada, and the difficulty about these food banks is they have a way of creating dependency, of digging a bottomless pit, that is not going to resolve the root problem of people who do not have enough money to clothe and house and feed themselves. A very courageous person that I met in Halifax who is head of the food bank there, together with his board, has made an unheard of decision: to set time line to close the food bank, in five years time. And already there's a hue and a cry from the public and from the media. But he's not going to do it alone. He's

throwing a challenge to the community of Halifax, to say, “This is a disgrace. This is not the way to live with others. And you as a community are both part of the problem and part of the solution.” We can do it.

And finally, as agents of transformation, we need to deepen our understanding of the Christian concept of transformation. As servants, we know the true agent: God-made-human in Jesus Christ, God-in-our-midst in the presence of the Holy Spirit.

I began with a wedding—a small story that is clearly linked with the big story of Jesus’ glorification on the cross and resurrection. But in between these stories in John’s gospel is the towel and the basin. The fact that Jesus did what only the most lowly of servants was expected to do, by washing his disciples’ feet, is a sign that servanthood is not slavery, something that we do against our will, but something that we choose. By taking up the tools of the slave, Jesus was taking the old God and revealing the new, turning in the old social structure and exchanging it for another.

But the towel and basin was not a single, isolated act. It represented what Jesus’ whole life and ministry were about: his willingness to listen, to assert his love, to accept the outcast, to serve. He spoke against the rich who lived off the poor. He allowed himself to be touched and anointed by a prostitute. He healed the sick and blessed the helpless. He talked with women in public. He talked with Samaritans and entered the home of pagans. He cleansed the temple and stirred up crowds.

As servants, by choosing the basin and towel, we also choose the cross. It is not imposed, it is not involuntary. To take up the cross is to live in this world with towel and basin in hand. It is not to gloss over pain or to live a band-aid faith. It is to live in a world where people are oppressed by governments, by employers, by spouses. A world where people do get sick, where people die, where people despair.

It’s only when we realize the old wine has run out that we can roll up our sleeves, pour out the water of service, and take up the towel, the basin, and ultimately the cross, knowing they are the instruments of transformation for building a new, resurrection community.

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