

## THE CELL. What is it? How it lives.

**Giancarlo Castelli**

Two days before The Paschal feast...of the Jews, to be precise, as usual, early in the morning, I entered the little chapel for a moment of meditation and I read the passage of the Gospel that opens the whole chapter of the passion of Jesus.

*"It was now two days before the feast of the Passover and Unleavened Bread. The chief priests and the teachers of the law were looking for a way to arrest Jesus on a false charge, and put him to death; but they said "Not during the Festival, for there might be trouble among the people."  
Jesus was in Bethany in the house of Simon the leper As he was reclining at dinner, a woman entered with an alabaster jar of expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfumed oil on Jesus' head. Then some of them became angry and said "What a useless waste of perfume. It could have been sold for more than three hundred silver coins and the money given to the poor" And they criticized her.  
But Jesus said "Let her alone, why are you troubling her? What she has just done for me is a very charitable work. At any time you can help the poor, for you always have them with you, but you will not have me forever. This woman did what she had to do: she anointed my body for burial, before I die. Truly, I say to you, wherever the Good News is proclaimed, and this will be throughout the world, what she has done will also be told in praise of her"*

(Mark 14: 1-9)

In the afternoon, Pauletta phoned me and asked me to prepare this talk for the seminar. She told me that the point was to convey in some way the spirit that pervades the life of the cell.

I explained to her all my doubts, not least the fact that for years I haven't been used to talking in front of so many people.

In short, however, we put off the decision to after Easter and I told her:

We'll see...if I get some inspiration..." The same evening, driving back from work, I tried to think about it: little or nothing came to mind, or rather a great confusion of thoughts, memories, emotions, accumulated, in twenty-three years of journeying. How can I put order into all this in a short talk? Above all how can I avoid being repetitive or obvious?

And it was then that the Word of God came to mind. There it is, I said to myself, I should start from the Word which always and ever is a guarantee of light and new aspects.

I began to think of the passage of the Gospel that I had meditated on that morning in the little chapel, to see if it was possible to adapt it to the theme, in order to have a guide that would lead us through the paths of the Spirit. In this case, the Spirit of the Cell.

According to the Gospel, Jesus is in Bethany, a place near Jerusalem, in the house of Simon the leper. By chance my cell also is in a place outside Milan. I like to think that Jesus, the Lord, takes the trouble to come into my house, far from the crowds, from the squares, the churches of the great metropolis... As in the case of Simon, he comes to me.

Every week we meet there, with my family, with my friends, and this makes my house a little domestic church, and He, the Lord, is always there. Even if one of us is missing, even if there are only three or four of us, He has never refused an invitation. It is the most persevering cell of all. At this point I can almost say that sometimes it is He himself who contacts us.

(He has all our mobile numbers...Email etc.): "Hey. Are you coming this evening? Good, see you soon".

## **THE CELL: *An experience of Community, of Friendship of a Domestic Church.***

The house, the Gospel says, belongs to Simon, the leper, and here I feel somewhat less at ease. I must admit that when I was thinking about this talk, I left Simon for the last. How can I compare myself in some way to a leper? Then out of a sense of proper behaviour I put him here, in his right place. In all probability Simon had been healed, by Jesus himself, and yet he still carried that “worrying” label. Why? Why do they still call him like that, I asked myself? Perhaps so as not to forget. Not to forget who Simon was, or what he was; or rather who was I, who were you before meeting Christ and being healed by him.

A leper, someone perhaps far from God. Certainly far (*in the heart*) from men. “A certain man” as the evangelists would say “whom the meeting with Jesus had healed, had transformed, had saved.” For Simon the joy of being healed of his disease was sufficient. He realized that in Jesus there was something more, that transformed forever his life, his house, his story, and so he decided to follow him. Once healed, Simon was grateful to Jesus: he stayed with him, in the circle of his friends. This gratitude, this sincere thanks, made him open the doors of his house and share this gift with others. Thus he opened the doors to salvation, just as Zaccheus had done, Zaccheus to whom Jesus himself had said:

*“Today salvation has entered into this house”. [Lk 19:9]*

## **THE CELL. *An experience that Changes your Life, a place of Welcome, of Thanksgiving.***

Now we come to the woman. Her arrival suggests different reflections that represent perhaps the beating heart of the cell.

The person, who comes to the cell just like the woman, brings something precious, the greatest treasure. His own alabaster vase, full of oil perfumed with pure nard, of great value:

### **His own heart, and he offers it, To Jesus.**

The woman breaks the vase in a sign of total offering. The perfume is so strong and intense that it permeates the whole house, and all those present are enveloped in it.

### **Before Jesus nothing is held back, nothing is kept. Everything is offered.**

The broken vase cannot be replenished. From that moment on, only a new vase, a new heart, can hold the perfume of the meeting with Christ.

**THE CELL. A place of Signs: still a Church, a domestic altar for the offering of self to God, sharing in communion with our brothers and sisters.**

But the woman's action does not end here. She goes beyond the unimaginable, to the point that some are scandalized. She anoints Jesus, thus doing a good work towards him, and at the same time an act of adoration and charity.

**THE CELL. A place where Jesus is placed at the centre of everything, before everything, above everything. A place where prayer becomes adoration, as we seek to please Jesus, knowing that we are doing something that is pleasing to Him.**

The woman's sign prefigures the extreme unction of Jesus, in view of his passion and death.

A few months ago, at the end of January we accompanied a young and holy cell member to the arms of Jesus and his Mother, at the end of a long illness. In a certain sense, I can testify that the cell, up to the last days, anointed our sister, with the same oil that is narrated in this Gospel passage. In the same way the cell anointed Jesus, with prayers, pleas, praise and thanks for her and with her, as long as it could, and together with her family. This experience, I know, is common to many other cells.

The prayer of intercession for brothers and sisters, for the suffering, for the afflicted, often accompanied by signs, and equally often transformed into concrete gestures of service and charity, is an experience that has always animated the Spirit of the cell.

I like to think of the graces and blessings obtained through our prayers: of all the brothers and sisters we have served; of those that we were able to help whether a little or a lot. But I like to think still more of the infinite graces we have obtained in the secret of Jesus's heart, and which our eyes have not seen. Think for example of the rich young man. At that time he went away sad, but we do not know what happened afterwards. I like to think that that young man started to follow Jesus, perhaps unseen, unnoticed in the crowds...and to follow him even to the cross... That cross from which Jesus, as he had said, draws all to him.....

**THE CELL. A place of compassion; where the sign becomes a reality.**

As in the gospel, where the negative reaction of some of those present is underlined, also in our reality, the "strong", radical, total experiences like this are not always shared and accepted by all: even by those who are declaredly, and certainly, close to Jesus, as in this case his disciples.

If it is true that the organism of the cells is by now an experience that belongs to the church, and not alone to this community, it is also true that, (for various motives) this type of experience is not always well received.

What encourages and galvanises the Spirit of the cells that live with this difficulty, is Jesus's imperative:

*“Leave her alone. She has done a beautiful thing to me”*

## **THE CELL. A place of Evangelization.**

This answer also opens up for us the way to the argument that can be taken, in a certain sense, as the anticipation, the pre-announcement of the Great Mandate “*Truly, I say to you, wherever the Good News is proclaimed, and this will be throughout the world, what she has done will also be told in praise of her*”

The cell with its patrimony of welcome, of prayer, of sharing, of signs, of compassion and of charity, is the humus, the fertile terrain in which the seed of evangelization finds all the elements necessary to grow and give life to new experiences of conversion and faith.

In that word “**also**” placed by Jesus in the centre of the phrase, I see a way of saying that in reality there doesn't exist just one method, or just one way, to bring the announcement of his Gospel.

Certainly that of the Parish Evangelization Cells is one of the most direct, as once more we can gather from a last comparison with the passage of the gospel which has accompanied us up to now, observing the rapidity with which the woman arrived straight up to Jesus, bursting into the scene and ignoring all the surrounding context, the murmuring, the protests that even just her entrance will have provoked in the dinner guests.

Given the fruits, we can certainly affirm that that of the Parish Evangelization Cells is also and above all a gift, sprung directly from the imagination of the Holy Spirit, who is in everything and in all, the inventor and continuous inspirer.

Allow me also to say that the Spirit blows continually...He speaks continually... Even now in this moment, to all of us.

To understand his message well, to absorb his voice and make it truly ours, ten minutes or an hour is not enough, or a whole seminar like this, even when we listen to it with an open and well-disposed heart. Here we can pick up a suggestion, a reminder, a prompt. But the word must then be meditated in silence and, above all, in the heart of our faith. Before Jesus in the Eucharist.

For this reason I invite you, the priests present here, when you return home and when the echo of these days has died away, to open the tabernacles in your churches, in your communities, in your parishes, and invite all, religious and laymen to come and adore.

**“Do not be afraid to open wide the doors to Christ.**