

“EVERYTHING THAT VALUES LIFE BRINGS US CLOSER”

Father Paolo Parise

• *By Sara Baptista* •

Father Paolo Parise sees Christianity as being much more than faith, it is a practice. Since he was a child in the small village of Marostica in the north east of Italy, where he was born, Paolo has taken Catholicism beyond church services and has lived it on an everyday basis, in its purest form – helping others.

The way he lives his religious mission is simply a continuation of the way he was brought up to see others as equals. His generosity, attention and dedication are the direct result of this. When he was a child he would go with his mother to offer comfort to ill people who lived alone. With his father he learned to value and fight for justice.

The sensitivity he developed from these experiences is evident in his work as a spiritual leader which is extremely practical and focussed on society. He has won awards for human rights.

Paolo Parise possesses keen sensitivity and spirituality, along with intense religious training. When he was still very young he decided to go to seminary. He explains that both his upbringing and his sense of religion, led him to a path of faith and to dedication to social causes. Once he ceased to perceive his relationship with God as an obligation or as merely tradition and started to understand it as a non-linear relationship, full of doubts and sometimes even conflicting he came to embrace his mission to help others even more.

The Catholic Church is divided into congregations and each one of these has its own charisma, a theme to which its members are dedicated. Straight after he finished his training, when he was 19 years old, Paolo chose to work with migrants and refugees with the Scalabrinian Missionaries.

Paolo makes a connection between this choice and his childhood experiences: “I would say that [my upbringing] gave me a degree of sensitivity that led me to decide to live my religious life in a congregation that chooses to work with migrants.”

One of the first times he had contact with these communities was with Turkish people living in Germany. In his words, they were “profoundly exploited”. Another of these early experiences was with people who came largely from north Africa to work on the harvests in Italy. They too worked under slave-like conditions.

After some time working with migrants in his home country, he had the opportunity, through his studies, to become a migrant himself, in order to get a slightly better understanding of what it is to live as an expatriate. Although he was familiar with the subject Paolo’s immediate reaction was rejection. “I had never thought of leaving Italy, I was very comfortable,” he recounts. After a period of reflection, however he decided to accept and came to Brazil.

That which had been unthinkable turned into a long-term reality. Apart from a brief period when he returned to his homeland to be ordained as a priest, he has been living in Brazil for 23 years. “I think that if I had said ‘no, no I don’t want to’ I would not be the same Paolo I am today. I would be a much poorer person in terms of experience and my ability to relate to others,” he says.

In 2010 he arrived in São Paulo at the parish Nossa Senhora da Paz, in Baixada do Glicério, also the location of the headquarters of Missão Paz, a non-profit making organisation, linked to the Catholic Church that works with migrants and refugees in the capital of the state of São Paulo.

Nowadays, the institution and Paolo’s stories are inseparable, so intense has his dedication to this cause been. Missão Paz, however, dates back to 1930 and as Father Paolo puts it, its path has been based on constant dialogue with reality and its challenges.

When talking about his work at Missão Paz, Father Paolo stresses that receiving a migrant is an on-going process not a single moment. He also says that it is not enough to provide food and lodgings. People who are migrants need help becoming truly integrated into society. On this basis, the organisation currently receives migrants and refugees from all over the world and gives them a bed, food, psychological support, language classes and help getting a job, the latter being apparently the most difficult phase.

In addition, over the years, Missão Paz realised that this humanitarian work was no longer enough and they decided to engage in pressurising authorities and in advocacy, to bring about legislation and public policies for the well-being of migrants in Brazil. The institution



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participated, along with other organisations, in putting together and getting approval for the New Migration Law, for example.

“This is a place where there is constant dialogue. Although there is a clear identity here in that we are Catholic Christians, there is profound respect for others and their religious traditions,” says the priest, who rejects fundamentalism and preaches unity between different beliefs.

He believes it is necessary to find common ground between religions. “When we strive for life and human dignity, I believe there is great convergence in the ecumenical, inter-religious field,” he explains.

However, conflicts between different beliefs do hinder the defence of human rights. Father Paolo draws on his experience with migrants in giving an example of this kind of dispute. He believes that those who claim to follow Jesus Christ yet behave in a xenophobic prejudiced way are going “against Jesus’s message.”

In this sense, he extrapolates the issue and does not make it a personal problem. He believes a combination of factors leads to migrants being seen mistakenly and ungenerously. The politicisation of migration with xenophobic discourses professed by populist politicians and the media’s carelessness in handling the subject are some of the relevant factors. Another point to be discussed is the anthropological element of relating to the unknown. “When faced with the unknown, human beings are always wary and suspicious. This is natural, but it turns into prejudice,” he says.

In his view, this type of dispute and imposition between people goes against the ideas of Jesus Christ. “When it is said that God made human beings in his image and likeness,

we are referring not only to that which I like, those who think the same as me, people who are in my little group. This means all human beings.”

In short, “everything to do with human rights also leads me to the sacred, because life is sacred,” he says. Father Paolo, like many religious leaders from different faiths, believes that religions must put human life first. “Everything that values life, brings us closer. That which values death has nothing to do with God,” he says. And he urges “let’s come together to write a page in history that values human beings.”

Translated by Jane do Carmo



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