

November 9 – Feast of Father Theodore

On November 9 we celebrate the feast of St Theodore, a day when we mark the patronal feast of Father Theodore. In this year, as we engage in the process of reconfiguring the congregation, we thought it good to look back at the life of Theodore, so we have chosen three facets of his life and spirituality that may speak to us today.

Steadfastness, fidelity and discernment - The young Theodore's search for truth and for God exhibited steadfastness and fidelity, characteristics evident throughout his life. He did not give in easily when the answers were not immediately apparent, but he stayed with the questions and continued to search patiently. Patience, he said, was a legacy inherited from Abraham, Moses and the people of Israel who never ceased to hope that the promises would be realized. Their attitude was to wait for God's time, to trust. It is this biblical attitude of inner freedom, of abandonment and trust that Theodore wanted to instill at Sion: "God's works do not proceed like those of human beings whose beginning and end we can encompass in a single glance: we need patience".¹

His passion for truth made him open to others. He allowed himself to be guided by others and by the signs of the times in his searching, decisions and consequent actions. We think of his hesitations in beginning a work for his people that Alphonse was urging and sought a sign which came in a very humble way with the request to educate the two small Würmser girls. When he called Sophie Stouhlen and Louise Weywada to Paris to help with this work he was not thinking of establishing a religious congregation, but he saw the Spirit at work in this group of women and in their desire for religious life. He was open to their request, and so embarked on a path that he never anticipated that brought with it difficult times but also the richness of the Congregation and all that it has been in its continuing history.

Do we seek the Truth or the true way forward for our lives both as individuals and as members of community? Are we able to speak our truth humbly and openly with our sisters and others? Are we able to see the Spirit calling us through the calls of others to go beyond our present limited ideas and visions of what should be to what could be?

¹ To the first novices at Sion, October 17th. 1853

Love of God – After he embarked on his spiritual quest Theodore soon discovered that God is tenderness; God is love. This conviction led him to teach, like St Augustine, that the way to know God is to love him.² “In God’s love”, he wrote to Louise Weywada, “you will find light as one finds the flame in the fire. And in the brightness of this gentle star, you will recognise what God is asking of you; you will know that God is love, that he gives only love, that he asks only love, love for love.”³

Love of God naturally flows into love of others. The love of the Sisters for each other was so important to Theodore that he asked that each sister learn 1 Corinthians 13 (St Paul’s hymn to love) by heart. Theodore also recognised that the spiritual gifts of humility and charity strengthen a person. Again to Louise Weywada he wrote, “ humility and charity are to the spiritual life what bread and salt are to the physical.”⁴

Theodore’s vision of community life was based on his theology of the end-times when all nationalities would be united. He therefore recommended that sisters of different nationalities live together. Reconfiguration demands that we recapture Theodore’s international vision, accepting, appreciating and celebrating our differences. Love for one another is demanding and sometimes difficult.

What means do we take to nurture and deepen our love for each other? How do you experience God’s love flowing into love for the other?

Mission - It is not difficult to see Theodore’s love and dedication to the apostolate. In the beginning he worked with children in his father’s school, and in fact he never stopped teaching. A man of action with an innate gift of communication, his deepest passion was to be pastoral. While he was intuitive, mystical and contemplative, his letters show that he was very realistic and had his feet on the ground. From the beginning of his priestly ministry he was not turned in on himself, but towards others. His passion for truth opened him outwards; he wanted to convey what he saw through preaching, confessions, visiting the sick, teaching and giving spiritual direction. Listening to the Word was his guide for mission. Theodore believed that the "Church has the mission of the Word," and he took this belief very seriously indeed.

Do we have the same depth of passion as Theodore for our ministry? Whatever stage of life we are at do we have an outward-looking pastoral attitude?

² Talk on Adult Religious Education at the Cathedral, 1833

³ Letter to Louise Weywada, 1837

⁴ *ibid*