

## THE IMPORTANCE OF THE NEW EVANGELIZATION

**1. Introduction:** It is not possible to talk about the Church, or about the Church today, without referring to the crucial moment in contemporary history that Vatican II has been for her, both as an event of grace and a paradigmatic reference.

The Church is rising. There is a significant increment of the faith in Africa, where the Church has grown tremendously during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Such vitality can also be seen in some sectors of the Church in Asia—in India, Vietnam, the Philippines. But, at the same time, we are seeing in Europe institutions of considerable size but little energy, as well as a very hostile culture, fed by secularism and laicism. At the same time, we are watching a continent that “is committing demographic suicide at an alarming pace.” Similarly, here, in the United States of America, not everything is gloom, not everything is scandal and sin. No. Here, the Gospel of Christ is also alive and effective. For instance, George Weigel assures us in *The Courage To Be Catholic: Crisis, Reform, and the Future of the Church* (Basic Books, 2000) that, 200,000 people embraced the Catholic faith in the United States in Easter of 2002, a number that for us is cheerful, and optimistic, and “a vital sign.”

### 2. Vatican II

The Second Vatican Council was the main event in the Church in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. In principle, it meant an end to the hostilities between the Church and modernism, which was condemned in the First Vatican Council. On the contrary: neither the world is the realm of evil and sin—these are conclusions clearly achieved in Vatican II—nor is the Church the sole refuge of good and virtue. Modernism was, most of the time, a reaction against injustices and abuses that disparaged the dignity and the rights of the person.

The Vatican II Council officially acknowledged that things had changed, and captured the need for such a change in its Documents, which emphasized truths such as these:

1°) **The Church is not the hierarchy, but the people of God.** “The People of God” is, for the Council, the all-encompassing reality of the Church that goes back to the basic and the common stuff of our ecclesial condition; namely, our condition as believers. And that is a condition shared by us all. The hierarchy has no purpose in itself and for itself, but only in reference and subordination to the community. The function of the hierarchy is redefined in reference to Jesus as Suffering Servant, not as “Pantocrator” (lord and emperor of this world); only from the perspective of someone crucified by the powers of this world it is possible to found, and to explain, the authority of the Church. The hierarchy is a ministry (*diakonia* = service) that requires lowering ourselves to the condition of servants. To take that place (the place of weakness and poverty) is her own, her very own responsibility.

2°). **Within the people, there is not a dual classification of Christians** –laity and clergy, essentially different. The Church as a “society of unequals” disappears: “There is, therefore, in Christ and in the Church no inequality” (LG 42 32).

No ministry can be placed above this dignity common to all. Neither the clergy are “the men of God,” nor are the laity “the men of the world.” That is a false dichotomy. To speak correctly, we should not speak of clergy and laity, but instead of community and ministry. All the baptized are consecrated as a spiritual house and a holy priesthood (LG 10). Therefore, not only we clergymen are “priests,” but also, side by side with the ordained ministry, there is the common priesthood of the faithful. This change in the concept of priesthood is a fundamental one: “In Christ the priesthood is changed” (Hebrews 7: 12). Indeed, the first trait of the priesthood of Jesus is that “he had to be made like his brothers in every respect.”

The original priesthood of Jesus is the one that has to be continued in history. And it is the basis for understanding the presbyterium and, of

course, common priesthood. Thus, the whole Church, the people of God, continues the priesthood of Jesus without losing their lay character, in the realm of the profane and the unclean, the “**cast out;**” a priesthood that does not focus themselves exclusively in the cult at the temple, but in the entire world, with a Samaritan praxis of justice and love. This priesthood belongs to the substantive plane; the other –the presbyterium —is a ministry and cannot be conceived apart from the common priesthood.

Fifty years have passed since these ideas were first proclaimed. But, even today, the greatest challenge is to examine the mission of the Church to conform it to the mission of Jesus. For that reason we speak in Latin America of a “**Continental Mission**” on par with a “**pastoral conversion;**” the documents of the Conference of Bishops in Aparecida in May of 2007 assert that, to make the right choice, and to become authentic, the Church needs only to return to Jesus.

Nowadays, the Church finds herself facing a demanding change, the most profound change in her history since primeval times. From being a European Church, more or less culturally uniform, and hence monocentric, the Church is on her way to become a universal Church, with multiple cultural roots and, in this sense, culturally polycentric. The Vatican II Council can be understood as the manifested expression of this step at the institutional level ( Cf. Concilium, “Unidad y pluralidad: problemas y perspectivas de la inculturación” [Unity and Plurality: Problems and Perspectives of Inculturation] No. 224, July 1989. p. 91). Thus, it is symbolic indeed that the last three Popes have not been Italian; the temptation of Europeanizing and Italianizing the Church has always been one tied to pretenses to power. Fortunately, things have changed.

### **3. The challenges that this situation presents to us as Christians**

The new thought of the Vatican II Council had been slowly brewing in the Christian conscience, and the time had come to articulate it clearly before the universal Church. The socio-ecclesial reality posited problems and

questions, serious challenges to which the Council wanted to respond. I would like to point out the following ones:

### 3. 1.- **Returning to Christ, the founding and fundamental rule of the Church**

There is no possible reform of the Church without a return to Jesus. The Church only has a future and can only consider herself great by humbly trying to follow Jesus. To discern what constitutes abuse or infidelity within the Church we have no other measure but the Gospel. Many of the traditions established in the Church could lead her to a veritable self-imprisonment. The truth will set us free, humility will give us wings and will open new horizons for us.

If the Church seeks to follow Jesus, all she has to do is to continue telling the world what happened to Jesus, proclaiming His teachings and His life. Jesus was not a sovereign of this world, He was not rich, but instead He lived as a poor villager, He proclaimed his program –the Kingdom of God—and the great of this world (Roman Empire and Synagogue together) persecuted and eliminated Him. His sentence to die on the cross, outside the city, is the clearest evidence yet that He did not want to ingratiate himself with the powers of this world. Shattered by their power, He is the Suffering Servant, an image of innumerable other servants, defeated by the ones who rule and call themselves “lords;” but it was He, poor, silenced, and humiliated, who was designated by his Father as His Beloved Child and whom God Himself resurrected on the third day.

3.2. **With the New Evangelization we restart (start anew) from the beginning:** we once more become the Church as proclaimer, servant, and Samaritan.

**“The Church receives the mission to proclaim and to spread among all peoples the Kingdom of Christ and of God” (LG 5).** If the Church has a mission at all, it is to manifest the deeds of Jesus. The Church has never been her own goal. Salvation comes from Jesus, not from the Church. The

Church is mediation; it is not an end in herself or of herself. She has never served a different Lord. That is the reason why Pope Francis is telling us that we have to reach out to the removed; we have to reach out to the periphery of the world, to the new missionary frontiers of the contemporary world.

The calling of the Church, in the likeness of Jesus, is to proclaim the Kingdom of God. Even Christ himself did not proclaim or preach Himself, but the Kingdom. The Church, as His disciple and His servant, ought to do the same. Her calling is to serve, not to rule: **“Servant of Humanity,”** called her Pope Paul VI. She must do this service living in the world, herself a part of the world and in solidarity with it, because **“the world is the only subject that interests God.”**

And there the Church, in humble company, helps making life intelligible and dignified, making it a community of equals, without castes or classes; without rich or poor; without impositions or anathemas. Her foremost goal is to care for the penultimate (hunger, housing, clothing, shoes, health, education...) to be then able to care for the ultimate, those problems that rob us of sleep after work (our finiteness, our solitude before death, the meaning of life, pain, and evil...). The answer the Church gives to the “penultimate” will entitle her to speak about the “ultimate.” For that reason, the Church must show herself as a Samaritan on earth –so she can some day partake of the eternal goods.

For this task of mission and testimony, the Church should always come equipped with faith and a spirit of service to humanity. Too many times she gives the impression of having too much certitude and too little doubt, freedom, dissension or dialogue. No more excommunicating the world, then, or trying to solve the world’s problems by returning to authoritarianism, rigidity and moralism, but instead keeping always the message of Jesus as her sole source of inspiration.

### 3.3 **Returning to the Church as “communion”**

In other words, making equality among the members of the Church a reality, because the People of God is one, “sharing a common dignity as members from their regeneration in Christ, having the same filial grace and the same vocation to perfection; possessing in common one salvation, one hope and one undivided charity. There is, therefore, in Christ and in the Church no inequality on the basis of race or nationality, social condition or sex, because “there is neither Jew nor Greek: there is neither bond nor free: there is neither male nor female. For you are all ‘one’ in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3: 28 gr.; Colossians 3: 11).” (LG 32) “All share a true equality with regard to the dignity and to the activity common to all the faithful for the building up of the Body of Christ.” (LG 32)

The communion of the Church is vital for her to be able to acquire credibility in today’s society. But this is not mere democratization; it is working to achieve an authentic coexistence as brothers and equals. And this goal certainly cannot be attained through a hierarchic mindset, understanding the Ministerial Order as a superior presbyterium, privileged and exclusive, in the way that it appeared to be configured, with absolute power concentrated at the apex and delegated down to the rest of the tiers of the hierarchy.

To undertake this journey, one has to go back to the life of Jesus, who, despite being a layman, caused “a change in the priesthood” (Hebrews 7: 12). Jesus’ entire life was a priestly life, in the sense that He became a man, was poor, fought for justice, criticized the vices of power, identified Himself with the most oppressed and defended them, treated women without discrimination, clashed with the ones who had a different image of God and of religion, and was forced by His own faithfulness to be prosecuted and to die crucified outside the city. This original priesthood of Jesus is the one that has to be continued in history. Offering Himself on the Cross gives Christ the power so “many believed in Him” (John 8: 27 30), because it was evident that everyone would look “on him whom they have pierced” (Zechariah 12: 10-11). If the Church wants to stay faithful, she

must also continue purifying herself through the martyrdom and the sanctity of the faithful.

Consequently, this is what Vatican II teaches: “The baptized... are consecrated as... a holy priesthood” (LG 10). As the Apostle Paul teaches, there is a diversity of functions within the Church, but none of them translates into rank, superiority or domination. All are brothers and sisters, and, as a consequence, equal.

Vatican II does not make the foundations of the Church into a polarizing outline of two extremes, “clergy-laity,” thus robbing the Christian assembly of their own protagonism, participation and responsibility. A presbyter is, above all, a “minister of the Word,” who must communicate to all the life that emanates from Christ, and for that reason devotes himself primarily to the altar and to the celebration of the sacraments. No one can replace him in this regard. But the field of laity offers plenty of spaces, alternatives and scenarios where he still does not make his presence felt in an incisive, decisive and courageous manner. Certainly the Church is more than a democracy, since the religious experience of faith allows her to open herself to a dialogue in pluralism and to share in action the great common causes of life and of the whole being of the universe.

#### **4. In a globalized world**

“The globalization of the exchange of services, capital and patents has led over the past ten years to establish a world dictatorship of finance capital. The small transcontinental oligarchies that hold the financial capital dominate the planet... The lords of financial capital wield over billions of human beings a power of life and death. Through their investment strategies, their stock market speculations, their alliances, they decide day to day who has the right to live on this planet and who is doomed to die.” (J. Ziegler, *Derechos humanos y democracia mundial* [Human Rights and World Democracy], Latinoamérica 2007, p. 26).

The effects and consequences of the neoliberal dictatorships that rule democracies are not hard to uncover: they invade us with the industry of entertainment, they make us forget about human rights, they convince us that nothing can be done, that there is no possible alternative. To change the system, it would be necessary to destroy the power of the new feudal lords. Chimerical? Utopian?

The Church decidedly bets on living the globalization of mercy and solidarity.

How can the Church aim to counteract the deleterious effect of the preponderance of economism and its fundamental postulates?

### **5. Return to a Church of the poor**

There was a considerable group of Bishops who took this option to the heart of the council, very likely stimulated by the words pronounced by Pope John XXIII on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 1962: “Where the underdeveloped countries are concerned, the Church presents herself as she is. She wishes to be the Church of all, and especially the Church of the poor.”

The Council picked up in turn this profound doctrinal guidance: “Christ was sent by the Father ‘to bring good news to the poor [...]’ Similarly, the Church encompasses with love all who are afflicted with human suffering and in the poor and afflicted sees the image of its poor and suffering Founder. It does all it can to relieve their need and in them it strives to serve Christ.” (LG 8)

It was the Latin American Episcopate who, especially in their Medellín and Puebla conferences, pushed forward this fundamental conciliar guideline: “The gross injustices in Latin America cannot leave the Latin American episcopate indifferent” (Iglesia y Liberación [Church and Liberation], Documentos Medellín, 14, I, 1); “The special mandate of the Lord to evangelize the poor should lead us to give actual preference to the poorest and the neediest sector, and to the ones that have been segregated for any

reason” (Id., 14, III, 9). “Solidarity with the poor means making their problems and struggles ours, discussing them. This has to translate into denouncing injustice and oppression, into a Christian struggle against the intolerable situation often borne by the poor, into a willingness to dialogue with the groups responsible for that situation to make them understand their obligations”. (Id., 14, III, 10).

Certainly, this conciliar option made a good many Christians reconsider the course of their own lives; it made many religious congregations review their rules and their ways of life; it brought about in much of the episcopate a spirit of reform, freedom, and prophecy; and in numerous places martyrdom flourished as a consequence of the commitment to liberation.

5.1 **Primacy of the last.** The Church ought to proclaim and testify, as a criterion of sociopolitical organization and education, that all men are brothers; and that, if we are brothers, we must fight for establishing relations of equality and to eliminate their greatest obstacles: money and power. We have to establish as a priority that those majorities who suffer poverty and exclusion (the last) will be the first. If Jesus calls the poor ‘blessed’ is because he is assuring them that their situation is going to change, and consequently it is necessary to create a movement that can bring about such a thing, restoring dignity and hope to them. We have to give primacy to the last:

“The original Christianity faces the reign of money and power as means of domination and introduces a passion into history: that the last stop being the last, that behaviors are adopted and politics and economies are put into place to give them primacy, so a society can be built without first or last, or, at least, with less inequality between human beings called to be brothers.” (R. Díaz Salazar, *La Izquierda y el cristianismo* [Left and Christianity], Taurus, 1998, p354.).

Putting first the needs of the last means to create a collective will capable of doing so, as well as of stipulating policies and social behaviors based on

solidarity, subsequently adopting common efforts and sacrifices. If a passion for the last becomes a mobilizing idea and moral force, we will then have the possibility of creating international politics of solidarity, of economic democracy, the assumption of evangelical poverty, attaining the creation of new social subjects, with a new set of anthropological values and a new purpose for both collective and personal life, all inspired in Christ and His Beatitudes.

5.2. **Detecting the causes of inequality.** In accordance with this passion for the last, having the necessary sensitivity and judgment to be able to detect the causes and mechanisms in our world that produce the main problems of inequality and injustice, and the worst.

5.3. **A Culture of Good Samaritans.** Making our own the culture of the Good Samaritan before the neighbor in need; feeling as our own the pain of the oppressed, getting close to them, and freeing them. Without this commitment, all religiousness is false. As Paul said, “if I have not love, I am nothing” (1 Corinthians 13: 1-13). The Eurocentric democracies are taking everything from them: life, culture, dignity, and freedom. And, before those crucified peoples, there is no honest stand other than “taking them down from the cross,” because God is present in them.

A culture of compassion cannot develop, the pain of others cannot be taken on, nor we can implicate ourselves in the reality of the suffering if we do not act out of love, like the Good Samaritan.

Thanks to injustice, many human beings die of hunger or are slaughtered. The kindness of God, who is kind to all his creatures, has to manifest in the concrete transformation of an unjust world into a just one. Justice opposes contempt, violence, deceit, slavery, death. To the extent that we eliminate those, life will be just and human.

In practice, the hyperventilation of the economy has produced great amounts of money, fruit of the erosion of governmental regulation and a symptom of the failure of materialism. But, as a result, there is always a

particular category of victim: “**the poor.**” Jesus of Nazareth made a warning that should be heeded by all the powers: civil and religious, democratic, monarchic, socialist, of any type: “**You know that those who are considered the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave.**” (Mark 10: 41; Matthew 20: 25).

#### 6. **Returning to a profoundly humane Church that will establish a new relationship with the world**

The Church could not continue posing as a reality facing the world, as a parallel “**perfect society,**” which pursued her own autonomous course, strengthening her walls against the errors and the influence of the world. This antithesis of centuries needed to be overcome.

The council intended to apply the renovation within the Church herself, because the Church was not the Gospel, nor was she a perfect follower of the Gospel; she was inhabited by men and women, who, same as everywhere else, and according to their limited, sinful condition, had established within her many customs, laws and structures that did not respond to the teachings or the practice of Jesus.

There are many texts where the council speaks of “**building a bridge to the world,**” of “**wanting to engage in dialogue with it,**” “**of feeling solidarity with their history,**” etc. The council opened with enormous sympathy to the world, to science, to progress, to human values, to the collaboration between science and faith, to respecting the autonomy of the creation and the rights of reason, of science, and of liberty.

I am pleased to repeat these words from Pope Paul VI: “**We call upon those who term themselves modern humanists... to recognize our own new type of humanism: we, too, in fact, we more than any others, honor mankind.**” (Paul VI, 7-XII-1965, No. 8).

“**The Catholic Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is a church of mission, an**

**emerging church,”** says George Weigel, American intellectual and author of the bestseller *Witness to Hope*, a detailed biography of John Paul II. From this truth, that the Church is in a state of mission, propelled by the new evangelization, we can draw three lines of action:

#### 6.1 First: **Presence of an open Church in constant dialogue:**

The Church, bearer of the Gospel, knew that she could not close her doors to dialogue without annulling the truth that could spring forth from anywhere –since God Himself has generously planted it everywhere. The Church did not have a monopoly on truth anymore, nor could she pontificate on a thousand human matters, or hold stances denoting arrogance or superiority. Instead, she should go out into the common arena, plainly and humbly, and share in the common search for truth.

Dialogue should precede the mission, as a simple attitude of listening, to build on what is common, rather than to insist in what divides, and to count on the contribution of humanisms and of non-Christian religions, which will take us back to the foundation of any creed, any ideology. What is Christian has its substrata, first and foremost, in what is human. One cannot be a Christian without being a person first. And the person offers a structure and a panoply of traits and possibilities that are patrimony of no one in particular, but instead of humanity as a whole.

#### 6.2 Second: **The New Evangelization**

The Christian identity should be built on a par with what is truly human, as a ferment as well as a service, and that requires being present where the great human causes are being ventilated, even without publicity, without renown, with the barest visibility, but bearing the strength of testimony, of the commitment to action, of unconditional love. A hidden presence, like that of a fermenting agent.

This presence would be shared with all those who in one way or another carry inside their chests the fire of love, justice, and charity, and of the construction of human rights. We could call this presence political sainthood, as an anticipatory taste of eschatological plenitude.

Surely this presence was not going to rely on the full protection and power of the institution for having being created from the bottom up, from the ones who have been reduced to insignificance, and it would advance in the way of diaspora, in small groups or communities opening a new model of Christian living, where action would be more diluted, more infinitesimal, but testimonial and prophetic. Parishes are once again the main referent of Christian live, and groups, associations and movements are subordinate to them, but conglomerating in an active, complementary manner.

The missionary movement in the Church is the emergence of a deep undercurrent, brought forth 125 years ago by Pope Leon XIII and revitalized by the Vatican II Council, as well as by the authoritative interpretation of the Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI. It points to a vision of hope in its mission of evangelization, amidst the challenges, conflicts and opportunities of the modern world. The mission is not new to the Church; instead, it is born with her, growing and developing along with her.

In contemporary pontifical magisterium, we have two significant benchmarks: John Paul II's 1990 Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, and the apostolic letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, from the same pontiff, in 2001. "In *Redemptoris Missio*, the Pope teaches us that the Church is a mission. It is not that she has a mission, like she has other traits; she is herself a mission. Everything in the Church should be weighted and measured in regard to the mission of converting the world."

And in *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, Blessed John Paul II challenges the Church at the end of the Great Jubilee of the year 2000, to leave behind the shallow waters of maintaining the institution and travel to the deep waters of evangelization. That is what Jesus tells his disciples in Chapter 12 of Luke, adding: "*Duc in altum*, put out into the deep." [Luke 5: 4] This means that the Church will convert the world not by argument, but by

example. There is no doubt that doctrinal argument is important, but people will be attracted by the humanity of Christians, those who live by the faith, who live in a human way, who irradiate the joy of living, the consistency in their behavior.

## 7. CONCLUSION

We know that in the last few years, especially during the times of Pope Benedict XVI, much of the media commentary has generally expressed contempt, irony, and merciless criticism. There is evidence of a media “ambush” of the Catholic Church. The mass media have been so influential in their insidiousness that many Catholics have distanced themselves from the practice of their Christian faith, and have retreated emotionally from their own communities, parishes, and commitments.

After the papacy of Benedict XVI, a time that was virtuous and heroic, the person of Pope Francis has arrived. I do not find naively optimistic to say that we are in the beginning of a new and dynamic period in the history of Catholicism, where the Church will constitute a missionary movement for the conversion of culture, propitiating and multiplying the signs of growth, of great vigor and hope –like for instance the world youth days; the development of ecclesial movements; the grassroots communities; the young priests who are arising all over the world; the celebrants and delegates of the Word of God; the Lectio Divina; the new forms of consecrated life; the commitment of a very active laity in parishes that understand faith as a firebrand that should shine around; and so forth.

## NEW WINE INTO NEW WINESKINS

On September 6<sup>th</sup>, during the daily Mass held in Santa Marta, Pope Francis reflected on two attitudes that a Christian should have in a wedding. Above all, “joy, because nuptials are a great celebration.” He explained that “the Christian is fundamentally joyful. For this reason, at the end of the Gospel, when they bring the wine, when he speaks of wine, it makes me think of

the wedding at Cana – and for this reason Jesus works His miracle – this is why Our Lady, when she realized that there was no more wine... but if there is no wine there is no party ... imagining that the wedding feast might therefore end with the drinking of tea or juice: it would not do ... it is a feast, and Our Lady asks for the miracle. Such is the Christian life. The Christian life has this joyfulness of spirit, a joyfulness of heart.” (Cf. Zenit. 06.09.13)

Similarly, the Pope pointed out that there are moments of crucifixion, moments of pain, “but there is ever that profound peace of joy, because Christian life is lived as a celebration, like the nuptial union of Christ with the Church.”

The second attitude a Christian ought to adopt, we find in the Parable of the Marriage of the King’s Son. The Pope explained, “It occurs to us: ‘But, Father, how? These were found on street corners, and you ask of them a wedding garment? This is wrong... What does this mean? It is very simple! God asks only one thing of us in order that we gain admittance to the feast: our all. The Bridegroom is the most important. The Bridegroom fills all!’”

Regarding the person of Jesus, Pope Francis has added that He is also the Head of the Body of the Church; He is the principle. And God gave to Him plenitude, totality, in order that, in Him, all things might be reconciled.

And the Pope has insisted that if the first attitude is celebration, the second is that of recognizing Him as the One. Furthermore, he has reminded us that we cannot serve two masters: one either serves God, or the world.

At the end, he spoke about the temptation of put the new wine into old wineskins: “The old wineskins cannot hold the new wine. This is the novelty of the Gospel. Jesus is the bridegroom, the bridegroom who weds the Church, the groom who loves the Church, who gives his life for the Church.” The new wine of Evangelization cannot be poured into old wineskins, and that is why the first and foremost thing is pastoral conversion; in other words, the spiritual renewal of all the People of God.

The New Evangelization entails pastoral conversion first, and pastoral conversion means returning to Jesus.

And to conclude, the Pope reminds us that the mission of the Church is the mission of Jesus Himself. And to do the right thing, and to become authentic, all she has to do is return to Jesus (ibid).

Thank you very much

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