

The New Evangelization: Building the Civilization of Love

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Human life cannot be realized by itself. Our life is an open question, an incomplete project, still to be brought to fruition and realized. Each man's fundamental question is: How will this be realized—becoming man? How does one learn the art of living? Which is the path toward happiness?

To evangelize means: to show this path—to teach the art of living. At the beginning of his public life Jesus says: I have come to evangelize the poor (Luke 4:18); this means: I have the response to your fundamental question; I will show you the path of life, the path toward happiness—rather: I am that path.

The deepest poverty is the inability of joy, the tediousness of a life considered absurd and contradictory. This poverty is widespread today, in very different forms in the materially rich as well as the poor countries. The inability of joy presupposes and produces the inability to love, produces jealousy, avarice—all defects that devastate the life of individuals and of the world.

This is why we are in need of a new evangelization—if the art of living remains an unknown, nothing else works. But this art is not the object of a science—this art can only be communicated by [one] who has life—he who is the Gospel personified.

I. Structure and method in new evangelization

1. The structure

Before speaking about the fundamental contents of new evangelization, I would like to say a few words about its structure and on the correct method.

The Church always evangelizes and has never interrupted the path of evangelization. She celebrates the eucharistic mystery every day, administers the sacraments, proclaims the word of life—the Word of God, and commits herself to the causes of justice and charity. And this evangelization bears fruit: It gives light and joy, it gives the path of life to many people; many others live, often unknowingly, of the light and the warmth that radiate from this permanent evangelization.

However, we can see a progressive process of de-Christianization and a loss of the essential human values, which is worrisome. A large part of today's humanity does not find the Gospel in the permanent evangelization of the Church: That is to say, the convincing response to the question: How to live?

This is why we are searching for, along with permanent and uninterrupted and never to be interrupted evangelization, a new evangelization, capable of being heard by that world that does not find access to "classic" evangelization. Everyone needs the Gospel; the Gospel is destined to all and not only to a specific circle and this is why we are obliged to look for new ways of bringing the Gospel to all.

Yet another temptation lies hidden beneath this—the temptation of impatience, the temptation of immediately finding the great success, in finding large numbers. But this is not God's way. For the Kingdom of God as well as for evangelization, the instrument and vehicle of the Kingdom of God, the parable of the grain of mustard seed is always valid (see Mark 4:31-32).

The Kingdom of God always starts anew under this sign. New evangelization cannot mean: immediately attracting the large masses that have distanced themselves from the Church by using new and more refined methods. No—this is not what new evangelization promises. New evangelization means: never being satisfied with the fact that from the grain of mustard seed, the great tree of the Universal Church grew; never thinking that the fact that different birds may find place among its branches can suffice—rather, it means to dare, once again and with the humility of the small grain, to leave up to God the when and how it will grow (Mark 4:26-29).

Large things always begin from the small seed, and the mass movements are always ephemeral. In his vision of the evolutionary process, Teilhard de Chardin mentions the "white of the origins" (*le blanc des origines*): The beginning of a new species is invisible and cannot be found by scientific research. The sources are hidden—they are too small. In other words: The large realities begin in humility.

Let us put to one side whether Teilhard is right in his evolutionary theories; the law on invisible origins does say a truth—a truth present in the very actions of God in history: "The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the Lord loved you." God says [this] to the People of Israel in the Old Testament and thus expresses the fundamental paradox of the history of salvation: certainly, God does not count in large numbers; exterior power is not the sign of his presence.

Most of Jesus' parables indicate this structure of divine intervention and thus answer the disciples' worries, who were expecting other kinds of success and signs from the Messiah—successes of the kind offered by Satan to the Lord: All these—the kingdoms of the world—I will give to you ... (Matthew 4:9).

Of course, at the end of his life Paul believed that he had proclaimed the Gospel to the very ends of the earth, but the Christians were small communities dispersed throughout the world, insignificant according to the secular criteria. In reality, they were the leaven that penetrates the meal from within and they carried within themselves the future of the world (see Matthew 13:33).

An old proverb says: "Success is not one of the names of God." New evangelization must surrender to the mystery of the grain of mustard seed and not be so pretentious as to believe to immediately produce a large tree. We either live too much in the security of the already existing large tree or in the impatience of having a greater, more vital tree—instead we must accept the mystery that the Church is at the same time a large tree and a very small grain. In the history of salvation it is always Good Friday and Easter Sunday at the same time

2. The method

The correct method derives from this structure of new evangelization. Of course we must use the modern methods of making ourselves be heard in a reasonable way—or better yet: of making the

voice of the Lord accessible and comprehensible. ... We are not looking for listening for ourselves—we do not want to increase the power and the spreading of our institutions, but we wish to serve for the good of the people and humanity giving room to he who is Life.

This expropriation of one's person, offering it to Christ for the salvation of men, is the fundamental condition of the true commitment for the Gospel. "I have come in my Father's name, and you do not receive me; if another comes in his own name, him you will receive," says the Lord (John 5:43). The mark of the Antichrist is the fact that he speaks in his own name.

The sign of the Son is his communion with the Father. The Son introduces us into the Trinitarian communion, into the circle of eternal love, whose persons are "pure relations," the pure act of giving oneself and of welcome. The Trinitarian plan—visible in the Son, who does not speak in his name—shows the form of life of the true evangelizer—rather, evangelizing is not merely a way of speaking, but a form of living: living in the listening and giving voice to the Father. "He will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak," says the Lord about the Holy Spirit (John 16:13).

This Christological and pneumatological form of evangelization is also, at the same time, an ecclesiological form: The Lord and the Spirit build the Church, communicate through the Church. The proclamation of Christ, the proclamation of the Kingdom of God presupposes listening to his voice in the voice of the Church. "Not speak on his own authority" means: to speak in the mission of the Church

Many practical consequences come from this law of expropriation. All reasonable and morally acceptable methods should be studied—to use these possibilities of communication is a duty. But words and the whole art of communication cannot reach the human person to such depths as the Gospel must reach.

A few years ago, I was reading the biography of a very good priest of our century, Don Didimo, the parish priest of Bassano del Grappa. In his notes, golden words can be found, the fruit of a life of prayer and of meditation. About us, Don Didimo says, for example: "Jesus preached by day, by night he prayed."

With these few words, he wished to say: Jesus had to acquire the disciples from God. The same is always true. We ourselves cannot gather men. We must acquire them by God for God. All methods are empty without the foundation of prayer. The word of the announcement must always be drenched in an intense life of prayer.

We must add another step. Jesus preached by day, by night he prayed—this is not all. His entire life was—as demonstrated in a beautiful way by the Gospel according to St. Luke—a path toward the cross, ascension toward Jerusalem. Jesus did not redeem the world with beautiful words but with his suffering and his death. His Passion is the inexhaustible source of life for the world; the Passion gives power to his words.

The Lord himself—extending and amplifying the parable of the grain of mustard seed—formulated this law of fruitfulness in the word of the grain of seed that dies, fallen to earth (John 12:24). This law too is valid until the end of the world and is—along with the mystery of the grain of seed—fundamental for new evangelization. All of history demonstrates this.

It is very easy to demonstrate this in the history of Christianity. Here, I would like to recall only the beginning of evangelization in the life of St. Paul. The success of his mission was not the fruit of great rhetorical art or pastoral prudence; the fruitfulness was tied to the suffering, to the communion in the passion with Christ (see 1 Corinthians 2:1-5; ... 2 Corinthians 11:30; Galatians 4:12-14).

"But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah," said the Lord. The sign of Jonah is the crucified Christ—they are the witnesses that complete "what is lacking in Christ's afflictions" (Colossians 1:24). Throughout all the periods of history, the words of Tertullian have always been verified: The blood of martyrs is a seed.

St. Augustine says the same thing in a much more beautiful way, interpreting John 21, where the prophesy of Peter's martyrdom and the mandate to tend, that is to say, the institution of his primacy, are intimately connected.

St. Augustine comments [on] the text John 21:16 in the following way: "Tend my sheep," this means suffer for my sheep.... A mother cannot give life to a child without suffering. Each birth requires suffering, is suffering, and becoming a Christian is a birth. Let us say this once again in the words of the Lord: The Kingdom of heaven has suffered violence (Matthew 11:12; Luke 16:16), but the violence of God is suffering, it is the cross. We cannot give life to others without giving up our own lives.

The process of expropriation indicated above is the concrete form (expressed in many different ways) of giving one's life. And let us think about the words of the Savior: "Whoever loses his life for my sake and the Gospel's will save it" (Mark 8:35).

II. The contents essential for new evangelization

1. Conversion

As for the contents of new evangelization, first of all we must keep in mind the inseparability of the Old and the New Testaments. The fundamental content of the Old Testament is summarized in the message by John the Baptist: *metanoëite—Convert!* There is no access to Jesus without the Baptist; there is no possibility of reaching Jesus without answering the call of the precursor, rather: Jesus took up the message of John in the synthesis of his own preaching: *metanoëite kai pisteúete èn tò eùaggelíu* (Mark 1:15).

The Greek word for converting means: to rethink—to question one's own and common way of living; to allow God to enter into the criteria of one's life; to not merely judge according to the current opinions. Thereby, to convert means: not to live as all the others live, not do what all do, not feel justified in dubious, ambiguous, evil actions just because others do the same; begin to see one's life through the eyes of God; thereby looking for the good, even if uncomfortable; not aiming at the judgment of the majority, of men, but on the justice of God—in other words: to look for a new style of life, a new life.

All of this does not imply moralism; reducing Christianity to morality loses sight of the essence of Christ's message: the gift of a new friendship, the gift of communion with Jesus and thereby with

God. Whoever converts to Christ does not mean to create his own moral autarchy for himself, does not intend to build his own goodness through his own strengths.

"Conversion" (metanoia) means exactly the opposite: to come out of self-sufficiency to discover and accept our indigence—the indigence of others and of the Other, his forgiveness, his friendship. Unconverted life is self-justification (I am not worse than the others); conversion is humility in entrusting oneself to the love of the Other, a love that becomes the measure and the criteria of my own life.

Here we must also bear in mind the social aspect of conversion. Certainly, conversion is above all a very personal act, it is personalization. I separate myself from the formula "to live as all others" (I do not feel justified anymore by the fact that everyone does what I do) and I find my own person in front of God, my own personal responsibility.

But true personalization is always also a new and more profound socialization. The "I" opens itself once again to the "you," in all its depths, and thus a new "We" is born. If the lifestyle spread throughout the world implies the danger of de-personalization, of not living one's own life but the life of all the others, in conversion a new "We," of the common path of God, must be achieved.

In proclaiming conversion we must also offer a community of life, a common space for the new style of life. We cannot evangelize with words alone; the Gospel creates life, creates communities of progress; a merely individual conversion has no consistency....

2. The Kingdom of God

In the appeal to conversion the proclamation of the Living God is implicit—as its fundamental condition. Theocentrism is fundamental in the message of Jesus and must also be at the heart of new evangelization.

The keyword of the proclamation of Jesus is: the Kingdom of God. But the Kingdom of God is not a thing, a social or political structure, a utopia. The Kingdom of God is God. Kingdom of God means: God exists. God is alive. God is present and acts in the world, in our—in my life.

God is not a faraway "ultimate cause," God is not the "great architect" of deism, who created the machine of the world and is no longer part of it—on the contrary: God is the most present and decisive reality in each and every act of my life, in each and every moment of history.

In his conference when leaving the University of Münster, the theologian J.B. Metz said some unexpected things for him. In the past, Metz taught us anthropocentrism—the true occurrence of Christianity was the anthropological turning point, the secularization, the discovery of the secularity of the world. Then he taught us political theology—the political characteristic of faith; then the "dangerous memory"; and finally narrative theology.

After this long and difficult path, today he tells us: The true problem of our times is the "Crisis of God," the absence of God, disguised by an empty religiosity. Theology must go back to being truly theo-logy, speaking about and with God.

Metz is right: the *unum necessarium* to man is God. Everything changes, whether God exists or not. Unfortunately—we Christians also often live as if God did not exist (*si Deus non daretur*). We live according to the slogan: God does not exist, and if he exists, he does not belong.

Therefore, evangelization must, first of all, speak about God, proclaim the only true God: the Creator—the Sanctifier—the Judge (see Catechism of the Catholic Church).

Here too we must keep the practical aspect in mind. God cannot be made known with words alone. One does not really know a person if one knows about this person secondhandedly. To proclaim God is to introduce to the relation with God: to teach how to pray. Prayer is faith in action. And only by experiencing life with God does the evidence of his existence appear.

This is why schools of prayer, communities of prayer, are so important. There is a complementarity between personal prayer ("in one's room," alone in front of God's eyes), "para-liturgical" prayer in common ("popular religiosity") and liturgical prayer.

Yes, the liturgy is, first of all, prayer; its specificity consists in the fact that its primary project is not ourselves (as in private prayer and in popular religiosity), but God himself—the liturgy is *actio divina*, God acts and we respond to this divine action.

Speaking about God and speaking with God must always go together. The proclamation of God is the guide to communion with God in fraternal communion, founded and vivified by Christ. This is why the liturgy (the sacraments) are not a secondary theme next to the preaching of the living God, but the realization of our relationship with God.

While on this subject, may I be allowed to make a general observation on the liturgical question. Our way of celebrating the liturgy is very often too rationalistic. The liturgy becomes teaching, whose criteria is: making ourselves understood—often the consequence of this is making the mystery a banality, the prevalence of our words, the repetition of phrases that might seem more accessible and more pleasant for the people.

But this is not only a theological error but also a psychological and pastoral one. The wave of esoterism, the spreading of Asian techniques of relaxation and self-emptying demonstrate that something is lacking in our liturgies. It is in our world of today that we are in need of silence, of the super-individual mystery, of beauty.

The liturgy is not an invention of the celebrating priest or of a group of specialists; the liturgy (the "rite") came about via an organic process throughout the centuries, it bears with it the fruit of the experience of faith of all the generations.

Even if the participants do not perhaps understand each single word, they perceive the profound meaning, the presence of the mystery, which transcends all words. The celebrant is not the center of liturgical action; the celebrant is not in front of the people in his own name—he does not speak by himself or for himself, but in *persona Christi*. The personal abilities of the celebrant do not count, only his faith counts, by which Christ becomes transparent. "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30).

3. Jesus Christ

With this reflection, the theme of God has already expanded and been achieved in the theme of Jesus Christ: Only in Christ and through Christ does the theme God become truly concrete: Christ is Emmanuel, the God-with-us—the concretization of the "I am," the response to Deism.

Today, the temptation is great to diminish Jesus Christ, the Son of God, into a merely historical Jesus, into a pure man. One does not necessarily deny the divinity of Jesus, but by using certain methods one distills from the Bible a Jesus to our size, a Jesus possible and comprehensible within the parameters of our historiography.

But this "historical Jesus" is an artifact, the image of his authors rather than the image of the living God (see 2 Corinthians 4:4ff; Colossians 1:15). The Christ of faith is not a myth; the so-called historical Jesus is a mythological figure, self-invented by various interpreters. The 200 years of history of the "historical Jesus" faithfully reflect the history of philosophies and ideologies of this period.

Within the limits of this conference, I cannot go into the contents of the proclamation of the Savior. I would only like to briefly mention two important aspects.

The first one is the Sequela of Christ—Christ offers himself as the path of my life. Sequela of Christ does not mean: imitating the man Jesus. This type of attempt would necessarily fail—it would be an anachronism. The Sequela of Christ has a much higher goal: to be assimilated into Christ, that is to attain union with God. Such a word might sound strange to the ears of modern man. But, in truth, we all thirst for the infinite: for an infinite freedom, for happiness without limits.

The entire history of revolutions during the last two centuries can only be explained this way. Drugs can only be explained this way. Man is not satisfied with solutions beneath the level of divinization. But all the roads offered by the "serpent" (Genesis 3:5), that is to say, by mundane knowledge, fail. The only path is communion with Christ, achieved in sacramental life. The Sequela of Christ is not a question of morality, but a "mysteric" theme—an ensemble of divine action and our response.

Thus, in the theme on the sequela we find the presence of the other center of Christology, which I wished to mention: the Paschal Mystery—the cross and the Resurrection. In the reconstruction of the "historical Jesus," usually the theme of the cross is without meaning. In a bourgeois interpretation it becomes an incident per se evitable, without theological value; in a revolutionary interpretation it becomes the heroic death of a rebel.

The truth is quite different. The cross belongs to the divine mystery—it is the expression of his love to the end (John 13:1). The Sequela of Christ is participation in the cross, uniting oneself to his love, to the transformation of our life, which becomes the birth of the new man, created according to God (see Ephesians 4:24). Whoever omits the cross, omits the essence of Christianity (see 1 Corinthians 2:2).

4. Eternal life

A last central element of every true evangelization is eternal life. Today we must proclaim our faith with new vigor in daily life. Here, I would only like to mention one aspect of the preaching Jesus,

which is often omitted today: The proclamation of the Kingdom of God is the proclamation of the God present, the God that knows us, listen to us; the God that enters into history to do justice. Therefore, this preaching is also the proclamation of justice, the proclamation of our responsibility.

Man cannot do or avoid doing what he wants to. He will be judged. He must account for things. This certitude is of value both for the powerful as well as the simple ones. Where this is honored, the limitations of every power in this world are traced. God renders justice, and only he may ultimately do this.

We will be able to do this better the more we are able to live under the eyes of God and to communicate the truth of justice to the world. Thus the article of faith in justice, its force in the formation of consciences, is a central theme of the Gospel and is truly good news. It is for all those suffering the injustices of the world and who are looking for justice.

This is also how we can understand the connection between the Kingdom of God and the "poor," the suffering and all those spoken about in the Beatitudes in the Speech on the Mountain. They are protected by the certainty of judgment, by the certitude, that there is a justice.

This is the true content of the article on justice, about God as judge: Justice exists. The injustices of the world are not the final word of history. Justice exists. Only whoever does not want there to be justice can oppose this truth.

If we seriously consider the judgment and the seriousness of the responsibility for us that emerges from this, we will be able to understand full well the other aspect of this proclamation, that is redemption, the fact that Jesus, in the cross, takes on our sins; God himself, in the passion of the Son, becomes the advocate for us sinners, and thus making penance possible, the hope for the repentant sinner, hope expressed in a marvelous way by the words of St. John: Before God, we will reassure our heart, whatever he reproves us for.

"For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything" (1 John 3:19ff). God's goodness is infinite, but we should not diminish this to goodness to mawkish affectation without truth. Only by believing in the just judgment of God, only by hungering and thirsting for justice (see Matthew 5:6) will we open up our hearts, our life to divine mercy.

This can be seen: It isn't true that faith in eternal life makes earthly life insignificant. To the contrary: only if the measure of our life is eternity, then also this life of ours on earth is great and its value immense. God is not the competitor in our life, but the guarantor of our greatness. This way we return to the starting point: God.

If we take the Christian message into well-thought-out consideration, we are not speaking about a whole lot of things. In reality, the Christian message is very simple: We speak about God and man, and this way we say everything.

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