



THE TIMELINESS OF THE PROCLAMATION

2012-08-10 L'Osservatore Romano



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The following is the intervention of the President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization at the first national conference "Proclaim 2012" on the new evangelization in Chatswood, Australia.

In the very first line of his *Motu Proprio*, *Ubicumque et Semper*, which officially established the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization, Pope Benedict XVI draws the attention of all to the person of Jesus Christ. "It is the duty of the Church to proclaim always and everywhere the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He, the first and supreme evangelizer, commanded the Apostles on the day of his Ascension to the Father: 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you'" (Mt 28:19). Such a beginning emphasizes both the necessity of placing Jesus Christ at the center of the new evangelization and the importance of recognizing that the faith received from the Apostles and that which is to be preached is namely the person of Jesus Christ. The sacred author of the Letter to the Hebrews uses a concise and definitive expression, for the intended purpose of leaving no room for doubt in the minds of his readers, that Jesus Christ is the entire, unchanging, and definitive Revelation of God: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and always" (Heb 13:8). Based upon these powerful words, we must continually recognize that there is no room for any hesitation, apathy, and much less for any form of neutrality in our lives of faith. In those three adverbs is to be found the solid basis of the revelation of Jesus: he is the 'corner stone' (Mt 21:42), 'the rock' (Mt 7:24-25), the foundation upon which we should build our personal lives. He was such 'yesterday', at the time, that is, when people came to have faith in him; he is so 'today' when his word is proclaimed and the mystery of his death and resurrection is celebrated; and he will be so 'always' until the end of time. In a word, Christ is always the same. In addition, the sacred author adds something quite important in the following verse: 'Do not let yourselves be led astray by all sorts of strange doctrines; it is better to rely on grace for inner strength' (v.9). It is as if the sacred author had been able to see beyond his own time—no less difficult—and had fixed his gaze upon the future of believers, when different philosophies and ideologies would continue to attack the stability and the integrity of the faith. There is nothing new in this perspective.

A glance at the letters of the New Testament only confirms this preoccupation. Several times Paul invites his people not to let themselves be cast about by the wind of different doctrines (Eph 4:4), not to subject themselves to regulations and to merely 'human doctrines' (Col 2:22), even putting us on the guard against 'doctrines that come from the devils' (1 Tim 4: 1) and those who preach 'another gospel', different from his own (Gal 1: 7-9). No less does Peter speak of 'false prophets' (2 Pet 2:1), while John adds to these 'many deceivers' (2 Jn 7). Perhaps the latter is the form which today we should be particularly vigilant of, the seduction of preachers who, lacking the necessary intellectual preparation, play insistently upon the chords of sentiment, putting forward utopias which, while promising every form of happiness, leave people in even greater loneliness. The echoes of the sirens is not the mythology of former times; unfortunately, it is the alluring flattery of our own days. Putting wax into our ears might make things easier and might leave everything in a padded world of illusion. To have the strength of Ulysses and keep ourselves attached to the main mast is not for most people; and yet it is the winning strategy to avoid falling between Scylla and Charybdis.

In order to avoid falling prey to the allure of the many 'human doctrines' purported to be better than the doctrines of faith, it is imperative that we be cognizant of the reality that we find ourselves in at the end of an age that, for good or ill, has marked our history for almost six centuries and that we must take seriously the new one which lies on the horizon. We do not know yet with certainty what this new period involves. What can be established with certainty at present are only a few pointers which orientate us towards a new epoch. As yet, it is difficult to be able to say who will be the protagonists of this period. What I consider important, in a period of transition like this one, is that the Church recognize her responsibility to take upon herself the task of transmitting a living patrimony of culture and of values which cannot be allowed to fall into oblivion. If that were to happen, the consequences would be damaging for the very civilization which people wish to build up. It would be born blind and lame. It would be incapable of looking to the future and would be equally incapable of constructing it. Only a living tradition, able to sustain and to consolidate the patrimony constructed across the centuries, is able to guarantee a future which is genuine. This would not be the first time that the Church has undertaken this task. Our history provides evidence of the role which she has been able to fulfill at times of cultural crisis and of momentous change.

From both Scripture and Tradition, we can see that the path of the new evangelization has been marked out: we are called to renew the proclamation of Jesus Christ, of the mystery of his death and resurrection to stimulate people once more to have faith in him by means of conversion of life. If our eyes were still capable of seeing into the depths of the events which mark the lives of our contemporaries, it would be easy to show how much this message still holds a place of special importance. Therefore, we need to direct our reflection towards the meaning of life and death, and of life beyond death; to face such questions, those affecting people's existence and determining their personal identity, Jesus Christ cannot be an outsider. If the proclamation of the new evangelization does not find its power in the element of mystery which surrounds life and which relates us to the infinite mystery of the God of Jesus Christ, it will not be capable of the effectiveness required to elicit the response of faith. From this point of view, *Gaudium et spes* indicates a path which deserves to be pursued: "In fact, only in the mystery of the Word incarnate can the mystery of man find true light ... Christ, who is the new Adam, revealing the mystery of the Father and of his love, reveals man fully to himself and manifests to him his most exalted vocation... Through the Incarnation, the Son of God united himself in a certain sense to every human being. He worked with human hands, thought with human intelligence, acted with a human will and loved with a human heart. Being born of the Virgin Mary, he made himself truly one of us, like us in all things but sin. The innocent lamb, freely shedding his blood, he earned for us eternal life; in him God has reconciled us to himself and with one another and he has torn us away from slavery to the devil and to sin,

such that each one of us can say, along with the apostle: the Son of God 'has loved me and sacrificed himself for me' (Gal 2:20). By suffering for us, he has not only given us an example that we might follow in his steps, but he has also opened up for us the way we are to go; if we follow it, life and death will be sanctified and will be given new meaning" (GS, no. 22). In the light of this text which, in some respects delineates a new anthropology for our age, within the primacy of the mystery, new horizons are opened up for the pastoral action of the Church. An initial path is that of the constant search for the face of God and, it is precisely this very quest that the Year of Faith seeks to inspire in the hearts and minds of all.

Yet, before proceeding to a further discussion on the Year of Faith, it is necessary to examine, from a unique perspective, the present crisis in which society finds itself; that with respect to its connection to the question of God. The new evangelization cannot think that this question lies beyond its field. In contrast to the past, today we do not encounter great systems of atheism, if they were ever great; hence, the question of God needs to be addressed in a different way. Today God is not denied, but is unknown. In some respects, it could be said that, paradoxically, interest in God and in religion has grown. Nevertheless, what I note is the strong emotive connotation and declining religion in the plural; there is no interest in a religion and much less for the theme of the 'true religion'; what seems to count are, rather, religious experiences. People are looking for different modalities of religion, selected by everyone taking up that which they find pleasing in the sense of ensuring for them that religious experience which they find more satisfying on the basis of their interests or needs at the moment. To this must be added that, especially for the younger generations, their horizon of understanding is characterized by a mentality strongly influenced by scientific research and by technology. These achievements, unfortunately, already hold the upper hand, even with respect to the basic elements of grammar and to culture in general. Thus, the new evangelization requires the capacity to know how to give an explanation of our own faith, showing Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the sole savior of humanity. To the extent that we are capable of this, we will be able to offer our contemporaries the response they are awaiting. The new evangelization begins once more from this point, from the conviction that grace acts upon us and transforms us to the point of bringing about a conversion of heart, and of the credibility of our witness. Looking to the future with the certainty of hope is what enables us to remain rooted neither in a sort of romanticism which only looks to the past nor to give way to a utopia because we are bemused by hypotheses which cannot find any confirmation. Faith calls for commitment today while we live; for this reason not to accept it would be a matter of ignorance or fear. However, for us Christians such a reaction is not permitted. Hiding away in our churches might bring us some consolation, but it would render Pentecost vain. It is time to throw open wide the doors and to return to announcing the resurrection of Christ, whose witnesses we are. As the holy bishop Ignatius wrote, "It is not enough to be called Christians; we must be Christians in fact." If someone today wants to recognize Christians, he must be able to do so not on the basis of their intentions, but on the basis of their commitment in the faith.

It is precisely this commitment in the faith, about which St. Ignatius of Antioch spoke so eloquently at the end of the first century, that the Year of Faith seeks to inspire in the hearts of those who do not know God and seeks to increase in the hearts of those who already believe. The Holy Father, in his Apostolic Letter *Porta Fidei* announcing the Year of Faith, beautifully expresses the Year's aim, its grounding in Christ, and its relationship to the new evangelization. The Year of Faith, which commemorates both the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council and the twentieth anniversary of the promulgation of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, he notes: "Is a summons to an authentic and renewed conversion to the Lord, the one Savior of the world. In the mystery of his death and resurrection, God has revealed in its fullness the Love that saves and calls us to conversion of life through the forgiveness of sins (cf. Acts 5:31). For Saint Paul, this Love ushers us into a new life.... Through faith, this new life shapes the whole of human existence according to the radical new reality of the resurrection.... 'Faith working through love' (Gal 5:6) becomes a new criterion of understanding and action that

changes the whole of man's life. [It] is the love of Christ that fills our hearts and impels us to evangelize. Today as in the past, he sends us through the highways of the world to proclaim his Gospel to all the peoples of the earth. Through his love, Jesus Christ attracts to himself the people of every generation: in every age he convokes the Church, entrusting her with the proclamation of the Gospel by a mandate that is ever new. Today too, there is a need for stronger ecclesial commitment to new evangelization in order to rediscover the joy of believing and the enthusiasm for communicating the faith. In rediscovering his love day by day, the missionary commitment of believers attains force and vigour that can never fade away (Porta Fidei, no. 6)."

Thus, the Year of Faith is a path, an opportunity, that the Christian community offers to the many people who possess a longing for God and a profound desire to meet him again in their lives. It is essential, therefore, that believers recognize the responsibility to provide an authentic companionship of faith, to become a neighbor to those who seek the reasons for and explanations of our Catholic beliefs. These opportunities, provided by the Year of Faith to form authentic friendships in faith, bring to the fore the very question of community. The new evangelization tends to make our sense of personal identity grow in relation to our sense of belonging to the community. A sociological tendency of our time presses us to distinguish between 'identity' and; 'belonging', as if it were a question of two contradictory realities. There is nothing more dangerous, in my opinion, than this contra-position. A belonging which was without identity could not be defined as belonging; it would remain always bound to a form of living together in society which modified its own coordinates according to the changing of the seasons, without any possibility of impressing upon them a real sense of common feeling and of active participation. From the reciprocal relationship which exists between identity and belonging there arises the possibility of verifying how the new evangelization can be effective and fruitful. Without a strong Catholic identity, by means of which our awareness of our own responsibilities in the world may grow, it will not be possible to understand even the requirement of belonging to the Christian community; on the other hand, without a deep sense of belonging to the Church, it will not be possible to have an identity which is aware of the mission it discharges. Identity and belonging determine our understanding of the permanent formation which applies to Christians in view of an ever more adequate knowledge of the faith, one which corresponds to each one's own state of life. A knowledge of the contents of the faith which remains linked to the adolescent stage could never allow someone to grow in their identity as a believer, no matter what roles they might occupy in civil society. In the same way, the lack of these contents often impedes people's own social, political and cultural action in harmony with their belonging to the Church. A fissure between identity and belonging is likely one of the causes which have contributed to the current crisis.

The Year of Faith will attempt to fuse this very rupture between identity and belonging, thus, increasing the faith of believers, who in the face of the daily pressures and challenges of life do not cease to entrust courageously and with conviction their lives to the Lord Jesus. In addition, the events for the Year of Faith, on both the universal and local levels, are aimed at addressing the broader cultural crises which often work contrary to the faith and, thus, seek to draw as many of our contemporaries as possible out of their spiritual poverty. The events of a universal character, which will be celebrated in Rome in the presence of the Holy Father, are numerous. To note only a few; there will be the Canonization of certain martyrs and confessors of faith, a celebration for youth, a celebration for those having been confirmed during the Year of Faith, a celebration of *Evangelium Vitae* promoting and defending the dignity of the human person from the moment of conception until natural death, a celebration for vocations, a celebration for catechists, a celebration of both old and new movements within the Church and, of course, a celebration of Mary, the "Star of the new evangelization". In order to communicate most effectively the events taking place in the local churches, whether through the particular Episcopal conference, the local diocese, the parish, organization, or movement, we have set up a website for the Year of Faith which offers people the opportunity to post what it is that they have organized for the Year of Faith. On this website, you will also see and be able to acquire the beautiful logo that has been designed to represent the Year of Faith. (1)

Central to the Year of Faith will be a focus upon the Profession of Faith. This will serve to return the Profession of Faith to its prominent place as the daily prayer of every Christian. To facilitate this, we have produced an edition of the Nicene Creed, which is the most familiar symbol to Christians due to its frequent usage within the context of Sunday Mass. The prayer is printed on the back of the well-known image of Christ the Pantocrator from the Cathedral-Basilica of Cefalù in Sicily. This image is intended to be the icon of the Year of Faith. It is my profound desire that the Creed, once again, becomes the daily prayer for Christians, as a synthesis of faith known and lived.

Having reflected upon Christ at the center of the new evangelization, impelling us to proclaim the Good News with ever great ardor, and having discussed the importance of the Year of Faith for the amplification of the new evangelization, I will now make some concluding remarks. In our time too, as had been done in times past, we need to face honestly and courageously the challenges which confront us. As in the past, when such difficulties gave rise to an intense activity of evangelization, so also today the Church needs to become aware of the great commitment which the new evangelization demands. These and other questions bring to the forefront the responsibility and the need to formulate a new apology of faith. Apologetics is not extraneous to faith; on the contrary, it belongs with full right to the act by which we enter into the logic of faith. In the first place, what is required is that the act of faith be a truly free act, the fruit of that abandoning of ourselves completely to God by which each one entrusts themselves to him with their intellect and with their will. Giving an explanation of one's faith does not seem to have enthralled many believers, at least in recent decades. Perhaps also for this reason, the conviction of faith has declined because the choice was not orientated in that direction. Having recourse to the traditions of old or to all sorts of experiences, but deprived of the power of reason, these have not had the capacity to lead and to sustain, especially when faced with a dominant culture, relying more and more upon the certainties of science. In some respects the situation has become more bogged down, partly because some people have considered that a weary repetition of past forms could constitute an insurmountable bastion of defense, without recognizing that those forms were becoming, instead, shifting sands. To think that the new evangelization can be brought about through a mere renewal of past forms is an illusion not to be cultivated. To be sure, neither is the solution the propensity for inventing novelty just to satisfy contemporaries always on the move and ready for any new experience, without even having the trace of a critical approach. The road to be followed is by no means easy. It requires that we remain faithful to the fundamentals and, precisely for this reason, are capable of constructing something coherent with those foundations, which at the same time are able to be received and understood by people who are different from those of the past. The trials will be numerous. Yet, the challenges which are placed on our path need to be confronted, analyzed and studied in such a way that projects may be created which may correspond to real progress for all. One specific task, however, which is asked of us is to avoid travelling alone. In any event, we cannot do this; we are incapable of it; by nature we are Catholics, that is open to all and wishing to be alongside each person to offer them the company of the faith. In order for this to happen, it is necessary to emerge from the form of neutrality into which many countries have encapsulated themselves in order not to take up a position in favor of their own history.

Who is responsible for devising plans, in particular for a new anthropology, capable of giving form to a new model of society? Certainly not one group on its own. This, then, is the time for a synergy able to provide a synthesis of the patrimony of the past, to pose questions to it in the light of the achievements which have characterized our period of history, in such a way as to transmit them to the generations which will come after us. The words of St Augustine may come to our support, when he writes:

Who are those who work to build up the Church? All those who in the Church preach the word of God, the ministers of God's sacraments. We are all in the race, we are all making the effort, now we are all involved in the building. And, prior to us, others have been involved in the race, others have struggled, others have built. But, 'if the Lord does not build the house, those who build labour in vain'... Thus, we speak from the outside; Christ builds from within. We may be able to see what attention you give, but what you are thinking only he who sees your thoughts knows. It is he who builds, who warns, who instills fear, who opens up the mind, who directs your mind to the faith And yet, we too labor as his workers" (Augustine, Commentary on the Psalms, Ps. 126:2).

Yet, we must never forget that the new evangelization needs to entrust itself to God, who shows us the paths to follow, and to the support of the Holy Spirit, who precedes, guides and sustains the new evangelizers.

A few days before being elected as Pope, Benedict XVI had delivered a lecture at Subiaco on the condition of Europe. In his lucid analysis of the present time, he expressed himself, amongst other things, in these far-sighted words, which constitute a program for the new evangelizers: "What we need at this time of history are people, who, through a faith which is enlightened and lived out in practice, make God credible in this world ... We need people who keep their gaze fixed upon God, learning from there what true humanity is. We need people whose intellect is enlightened by the light of God and whose hearts God may open up in such a way that their intellect may speak to the intellect of others and that their hearts may open the hearts of others. Only through people who are touched by God can God return to humanity." Hence, the new evangelization starts from here: from the credibility of our living as believers and from the conviction that grace acts and transforms to the point of converting the heart. It is a journey which still finds Christians committed to it after two thousand years of history.

Within this context, it is worth recalling a story from the Middle Ages. A poet passed by some work being conducted and saw three workers busy at their work; they were stone cutters. He turned to the first and said: 'What are you doing, my friend?' This man, quite indifferently, replied: 'I am cutting a stone'. He went a little further, saw the second and posed to him the same question, and this man replied, surprised: 'I am involved in the building of a column'. A bit further ahead, the pilgrim saw the third and to this man also he put the same question; the response, full of enthusiasm, was: 'I am building a cathedral'. The old meaning is not changed by the new work we are called to construct. There are various workers called into the vineyard of the Lord to bring about the new evangelization; all of them will have some reason to offer to explain their commitment. What I wish for and what I would like to hear is that, in response to the question: 'What are you doing, my friend?', each one would be able to reply: 'I am building a cathedral'. Every believer who, faithful to his baptism, commits himself or herself with effort and with enthusiasm every day to give witness to their own faith offers their original and unique contribution to the construction of their great cathedral in the world of today. It is the Church of our Lord, Jesus, his body and his spouse, the people constantly on the way without ever becoming weary, which proclaims to all that Jesus is risen, has come back to life, and that all who believe in him will share in his own mystery of love, the dawn of a day which is always new and which will never fade.

1) The logo is composed as a square bordered field within which a boat, symbolizing the Church, is represented sailing upon the waves. The main mast of the boat forms a cross from which sails are displayed in the form of a dynamic sign which compose the trigram of Christ-IHS. The background to the sails is a sun which, in association with the trigram, refers to the Eucharist. It is my hope that this logo be reproduced as much as possible and be distributed for the purpose of reminding people of the importance and the power of the Year of Faith for the Church's essential mission of evangelization.

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