

# ESSENTIAL CONTENTS FOR NEW EVANGELIZATION

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## 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 ên tù 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 theology, 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.