

The Holy Spirit and the Church

II: Evangelisation, Ecumenism and the Holy Spirit

In this talk I look at the new situation created first by the call of St John Paul II and Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI for a New Evangelization and the radicalization of this call by Pope Francis in his vision for a pastoral and missionary conversion of the whole Church. We can look at this in two parts: (1) the Holy Spirit and Evangelization; and (2) the Holy Spirit and ecumenism in the pastoral and missionary conversion of the Church.

The Holy Spirit and Evangelization

We have to be convinced of the total necessity of the Holy Spirit for any evangelization to be effective. It is not possible to preach the Gospel without the Holy Spirit; it is not possible to believe the Gospel without the Holy Spirit. Only those who are truly converted can bring a message that converts the hearers. Only those who love the Lord can convert the hearers to a love for the Lord. It is only the message of the saving death and resurrection that produces the death and resurrection of conversion in the hearer. Note the tight link here in the apostle Paul in Romans 6: 3 - 11.

From the start of the turn of the Catholic Church to evangelization, the role of the Holy Spirit was emphasized. Most notably, Paul VI taught: “The Holy Spirit is the principal agent of evangelization.”¹ The last section of Pope Francis’s document *Evangelii Gaudium* is headed “Spirit-Filled Evangelizers”. I want to look at distinct areas where the Holy Spirit’s role is foundational:

1. The Content of the Gospel

The Holy Spirit gives light to understand what is at the heart of the Gospel message. “Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God.” (1 Cor. 2:12). So it is only by the Spirit of God that anyone can say [with conviction] “Jesus is Lord” (see 1 Cor. 12:3).

It is only by the Spirit of God that Christians can understand the difference between the kerygma that converts and the didache that enlightens the heart how to live out the Gospel. This has been a rediscovery of biblical, liturgical, and patristic scholarship; and was required by the Council’s decision to restore the catechumenate for adults (RCIA). “the kerygma which needs to be the centre of all evangelizing activity and all efforts at Church renewal” (EG, para. 164). “In this basic core, what shines forth is the beauty of the saving love of God made manifest in Jesus Christ who died and rose from the dead.” (EG, para. 36).

¹ *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975), para. 75. This para also has the statement: “We live in the Church at a privileged moment of the Spirit.” This was clearly in the wake of the Council, but it came also a few months after the first gathering of the Catholic charismatic renewal with the Pope.

2. Conviction of the Truth of the Gospel

It is one thing to have heard Catholic teaching, for example concerning the identity of Jesus, and his saving death and resurrection, and it is another thing to be convinced of this truth in the heart. This conviction is the work of the Holy Spirit. See how Paul writes in Romans: “if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For man believes with his heart and so is justified, and he confesses with his lips and so is saved.” (Rom. 10: 9-10). This is a description of the working of the Spirit in the believer. It spells out what conversion means. Conversion means a change of heart, a transformation that changes the direction of our lives. But the heart-change is made real when we commit ourselves publicly in explicit confession.

Without this conviction that is the work of the Holy Spirit, there can be no effective evangelization.

3. Conviction of the Need for People to hear the Gospel and to be Converted

It is another aspect of the enlightening work of the Holy Spirit that Christians need to understand the need of all people for conversion. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). “There is one God; there is also one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus who gave himself as a ransom for us all. (1 Tim. 2:5).

Many Catholics have come to think in the following way: God is merciful, most people are basically good, we try to set a good example, and God will have mercy on them when they die. Any thinking of this kind undermines all evangelization. For it is not recognizing the need of every person for salvation from sin. Only the Holy Spirit can shake us up out of this laziness and complacency. It is not that we have to think that everyone who has not witnessed to an explicit conversion is going to hell. It is that explicit conversion and confession in Jesus is the demonstration of the one appointed way to the Father. While we always trust in the mercy of the Father, we have to know that there is no security in any other place.

My experience is that unless people have a real familiarity with the Bible, they will not have an adequate understanding of the need of all people for conversion, they will not have a clarity on the Gospel message and they will not understand the role of the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit and Ecumenism in the Pastoral and Missionary Conversion of the Church

The Catholic Church committed itself to ecumenism in the Decree on Ecumenism at Vatican Two. Paul VI described dialogue as “the way of the Church”². In his encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* (1995), St John Paul II insisted that to be a Catholic today meant being ecumenical. Above para. 7 is a heading “The Way of Ecumenism: the Way of the Church.” Then we read: “The Catholic Church embraces with hope the commitment to ecumenism as a duty of the Christian conscience enlightened by faith and guided by love.”³

Since *Lumen Gentium*, the Catholic Church recognizes that baptized Christians of other confessions and denominations are within not outside the body of Christ - the technical language is imperfect communion. But in practice we have rarely made this truth part of the way we act as Church. Part of the significance of Pope Francis may well be that he truly treats other Christians as brothers and sisters. This has major implications for evangelization - in fact Fr Blacknicki was one of the first to grasp these implications. He believed that a major reason the ecumenical movement was moving so slowly was that there was no joint evangelization.

In *Ut Unum Sint* St John Paul II took Catholic understanding of ecumenism deeper. For example, he challenged our understanding of ecumenical dialogue, when he wrote that ecumenical dialogue is not just an exchange of ideas, but “an exchange of gifts”. This was a recognition that all Churches and ecclesial communities, including the Catholic Church, had gifts from which the others could benefit, and they have gifts from which the Catholic Church can benefit. I wonder if he first understood something of this through being the bishop of Fr Blacknicki. Francis takes the exchange of gifts idea further when he writes: “If we really believe in the abundantly free working of the Holy Spirit, we can learn so much from one another! It is not just about being better informed about others, but rather about reaping what the Holy Spirit has sown in them, which is also meant to be a gift for us.” (para. 246).

Three Steps to Learning from Other Christian Communities

1. *Recognizing the Gifts of Other Christians.* What are the gifts that Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians bring to us as Catholics?

² Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam* (1964)

³ St John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*, para. 8.

- The core Gospel that pierces the heart and produces conversion
- Conversion makes us a new creation; the converted believer is not just improved, more moral
- The relationship between conversion as death and baptismal immersion
- The need for the impacted person to make a decision for Jesus
- The need to evangelize people into living faith communities
- The need to train people with a heart for evangelization
- The need for a practical training and for a practical biblical knowledge
- The role of signs and wonders especially healing in evangelistic ministry (Pentecostals & Charismatic free churches)⁴

2. *Receiving These Gifts.* How do we receive these gifts as Catholics and receive them into our Catholic heritage? The first principle is that this learning is not copying. There is a necessary process of discernment: (1) first what is most truly the work of the Holy Spirit in the others? (2) asking the Lord how we can learn from them from within our heritage. How do we receive such gifts into a liturgical heritage and into a different theological heritage? The Lord will give light and you advance a step at a time. As we do this, we as Catholics are renewing our study of Scripture, and we look back to the earliest phases of the Church to discover what the kerygma and didache looked like then. We look at Evangelical practice now while also examining our own tradition - to understand better our own history. This enables us to receive key Evangelical insights into our own church life, without receiving elements in their theology with which we remain uncomfortable: insufficient attention to natural and human causes with only God or Satan as causes; insufficient attention to the corporate and ecclesial (too individualistic); a tendency to see everything as discontinuous with very little continuity.

In fact, a learning of this kind has been taking place over the past 15 years in relation to the Alpha course. From an Anglican background, it is an easier process of reception. (Lutheran-Catholic declaration on Justification by Faith.)

⁴ Catholics active in charismatic renewal have experience of charisms in relation to evangelization, but this is less developed.

This kind of process can only happen in a healthy way when there are growing relationships of trust and friendship between the separate Christian churches and traditions. Then we are being led by the Holy Spirit into a deeper understanding of the right relationship between the individual believer and the Church, between discontinuity and continuity in the Church, etc. The discontinuity - continuity issue is fundamental for understanding conversion. For death and resurrection involves a discontinuity (death), but a new form of continuity (the one who dies is raised).

3. *Making a Humble Confession.* A first step may be to recognize and confess our need as Church. While St John Paul II urged Catholics to confess the sins of the past, Francis is openly recognizing our need as Church. “I hope that all communities will devote the necessary effort to advancing along the path of a pastoral and missionary conversion which cannot leave things as they presently are.” (EG, para. 25). Pope Francis has spoken of ecclesial self-referentialism, a church focused on itself. But where we see that this has been true, we need to confess it humbly before God. “Lord, as a Church, we have been focused on our institutional well-being, on our reputations; we have not been bold for the Gospel. We are unsure how to preach your Gospel in our changing world.”

Last week I was in Rome at the offices of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. Msgr Juan Usma, the member of the staff responsible for relations with Evangelicals and Pentecostals, said that the Catholicity of the Church requires the inclusion of the others. This statement really comes from the Decree on Ecumenism, cited by Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*. We could also confess that we have not really believed this. We could confess with other Christians that we have not really recognized our need for each other. We all think we can fulfil God’s mission on our own.

Now with Pope Francis, there is a full recognition of Evangelical, Pentecostal and new charismatic Christians as brothers and sisters. The door is open for working together. “If we concentrate on the convictions we share, and if we keep in mind the principle of the hierarchy of truths, we will be able to progress decidedly towards common expressions of proclamation, service and witness.” (EG, para. 246).

We need to proclaim the Gospel together. We have not realized how damaging Christian divisions have been for our witness before the world. John 17. The Gospel is a message of **reconciliation**, of Jesus overcoming all the divisions caused by sin. By not preaching the Gospel together, we are sending two messages: the spoken message is the Gospel as we understand it, the one not spoken is that the Gospel has not been effective in overcoming our divisions (i.e. a counter-testimony).

A Remaining Question

The place of the second coming of Jesus, and the full of eternal life in bodily resurrection, is really part of the Good News - central to apostolic testimony. But it often is not a part of the Gospel as preached, also by Evangelicals. Paul VI: “evangelization cannot but include the prophetic proclamation of a hereafter, man’s profound and definitive calling, in both a continuity and a discontinuity with the present situation ... Evangelization therefore also includes the preaching of hope in the promises made by God in the new Covenant in Jesus Christ”⁵

⁵ *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, para. 28.