

FROM RENEWAL TO CONVERSION OF THE CHURCH

Warszawa, Sept 26, 2014

The Goal of St John XXIII's New Pentecost

When St John XXIII called the Second Vatican Council, he composed a prayer for Catholics to say daily for the Council. This prayer began: "Renew Your wonders in this our day as by a new Pentecost." How much has the prayer of Pope John been answered over the last 50 years? There has been an immense renewal in Catholic teaching, in liturgical practice, in catechetics, in our understanding of the dignity and call of the laity. There has been a transformation in relations with other Christians and with the Jewish people. But how much real new life and vitality do we see? There are the new ecclesial movements and the new communities. There are remarkable events like the World Youth Days started by St John Paul II. In all this, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the charismatic renewal can be seen as an answer or part of an answer to the prayer of St John XXIII. But then we have to ask how much has the charismatic renewal really impacted the life of the Catholic Church as a whole. Here we have to admit - Yes, the renewal has been a wonderful grace for the Church, but its impact has been quite limited - maybe especially in Europe.

However, we can see the ministry of Pope Francis as launching a new phase in the transformation of the Church by the Holy Spirit. Pope John had called the Council for the renewal of the Church. Now Pope Francis is calling for "a pastoral and missionary conversion of the Church" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, para. 25). "The Second Vatican Council presented ecclesial conversion as openness to a constant self-renewal born of fidelity to Jesus Christ" (EG, para. 26; here he cites the Decree on Ecumenism, para. 6). **Conversion** is a stronger word than **Renewal**. Such a conversion of the Church is impossible without the new Pentecost for which Pope John prayed.

Looking back, we can see that Vatican Two opened the door (Pope John had used the gesture of opening the windows to let in the fresh air) by a renewal of theology produced by a return to the sources and by a renewal of key structures, especially the liturgy. The systematic renewal of Catholic teaching and its being formed into a coherent whole was a major achievement of St John Paul II through many encyclicals and through the new Catechism. This was a necessary laying of the foundations, but now Pope Francis is calling for the renewal of life that we call conversion.

Living the Gospel

As Pope Francis is presenting this conversion of the Church, he is leading by example. To be converted is not just to have an experience of Jesus; it is to live the Gospel as a disciple of Jesus. Since his election, Francis has spoken many times about "going out"; the first section in Chapter One of *Evangelii Gaudium* is headed "A Church which goes forth [out]". "Each Christian and every community must discern the path that the Lord points out, but all of us are asked to obey his call to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the 'peripheries' in need of the light of the Gospel." (EG, para. 20). Later he speaks of reaching "the fringes of humanity" (EG, para. 46).

This going out to the extremities or the peripheries requires a death to self. At the heart of this conversion is the Gospel option: die so you can live. "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it." (Luke 9:23-24). Going out means being willing to leave our world, our friends, our habits, our ambitions out of love for Jesus and the Gospel. Going out to the extremities means going

to those who are different, those with whom we do not want to associate, those who are despised or regarded as unimportant by the world. “To whom should we go first? When we read the Gospel we find a clear indication: not so much our friends and wealthy neighbours, but above all the poor and the sick, those who are usually despised and overlooked, ‘those who cannot repay you’ (Luke 14:14).” (EG, para. 48).

So this conversion of the Church has to begin with us. But it also calls for a conversion of our church mentalities. We will look at some of these later in this talk. Francis speaks first of changing mentalities, only then of changing structures. “Changing structures without generating new convictions and attitudes will only ensure that those same structures will become, sooner or later, corrupt, oppressive and ineffectual.” (EG, para. 189).

The Conversion of the Church

The call to conversion applies to all levels in the Church. Francis mentions “a conversion of the papacy”. “The papacy and the central structures of the universal Church also need to hear the call to pastoral conversion.” (EG, para. 32). Here he says “Excessive centralization, rather than proving helpful, complicates the Church’s life and her missionary outreach.” (EG, para. 32).

But to bring this down to the local level, Pope Francis says that “each particular church”, that is each diocese, “is called to missionary conversion.” (EG, para. 30). That is to say that the church in each place has to be outward-looking: “Its joy in communicating Jesus Christ is expressed both by a concern to preach him in areas of greater need and in constantly going forth to the outskirts of its own territory or towards new sociocultural settings. Wherever the need for the light and the life of the risen Christ is greatest, it will want to be there. I encourage each particular Church to undertake a resolute process of discernment, purification and reform.” (EG, para. 30).

The bishop is to encourage participation by the faithful in this missionary reshaping of the Church. Francis here sees that sometimes the bishop has to be out in front pointing the way, sometimes he will be in the middle “with his unassuming and merciful presence”, and at other times he will follow helping “those who lag behind and - above all - allowing the flock to strike out on new paths.” (EG, para. 31). “The principal aim of these participatory processes should not be ecclesiastical organization but rather **the missionary aspiration of reaching everyone.**” (EG, para. 31). It seems that as bishop of Rome, Pope Francis is leading the bishops by example. Here we can see that perhaps the challenges of Pope Francis are greater for the bishops than for the rest of us! This is a strong motive to pray for our bishops.

From Moralism to Joy in the Gospel

Conversion to Jesus brings joy. This joy comes from our new freedom from sin, from patterns that block us from God. Conversion is to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That means subordinating the rest of our ministry to the heart of the Gospel. “All revealed truths derive from the same divine source and are to be believed with the same faith, yet some of them are more important for giving direct expression to the heart of the Gospel. 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). Here Pope Francis is warning against the kind of preaching that is focused on denouncing evils and is full of moral exhortations without any mention of the Gospel and of the mercy of the Father. “Christian morality is not a form of stoicism, or self-denial, or merely a practical philosophy or a catalogue of sins and faults. Before all else, the Gospel invites us to

respond to the God of love who saves us, to see God in others and to go forth from ourselves to seek the good of others.” (EG, para. 39).

I want to illustrate this from the Old Testament. The foundation of our model code is the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments. But in context, the Commandments are given as part of the covenant between God and his chosen people. The Israelites are to live this way, because God has chosen them saying “I will be your God and you will be My People.” The revelation is not just of moral rules, but of the holy God who is jealous for his people.

Preaching

In the section of *Evangelii Gaudium* on “The Proclamation of the Gospel” Pope Francis begins by citing St John Paul II: “there can be no true evangelization without the explicit proclamation of Jesus as Lord” and without “the primacy of the proclamation of Jesus Christ in all evangelizing work” (EG, para. 110). Later in this section, there is teaching on the homily (paras 135 - 144) and then on “Preparing to Preach” (paras 145 - 159).

Important points to note: (1) have confidence in the Word of God (136); (2) the homily “surpasses all forms of catechesis as the supreme moment in the dialogue between God and his people” (137); (3) belongs to liturgical action (138); (4) the Lord, not the preacher, must be the centre of attention (138); (5) “The same Spirit who inspired the Gospels and who acts in the Church also inspires the preacher to hear the faith of God’s people and to find the right way to preach at each Eucharist.” (139) (6) “the secret lies in the way Jesus looked at people, seeing beyond their weaknesses and failings.” (141) (7) Words which set hearts on fire (142); (8) speaking from the heart, enlightened by the fullness of revelation (144); (9) a preacher who does not prepare is “dishonest” (145); (10) give whole attention to the biblical text ... preparation requires love (146); (11) familiarity with the Bible; message to be alive first in the heart of the pastor (149); (12) “Christ’s message must truly penetrate and possess the preacher, not just intellectually but in his entire being.” (151); (13) Contemplate the Word, and contemplate the people (154); (14) “positive preaching always offers hope, points to the future, does not leave us trapped in negativity.” (159).

“When preaching is faithful to the Gospel, the centrality of certain truths is evident and it becomes clear that Christian morality is not a form of stoicism, or self-denial, or merely a practical philosophy or a catalogue of sins and faults. Before all else, the Gospel invites us to respond to the God of love who saves us, to see God in others and to go forth from ourselves to seek the good of others.” (EG, para. 39).

Conversion means Yes and No

In Part II of *Evangelii Gaudium*, headed “Amid the Crisis of Communal Commitment”, Pope Francis has a number of sub-headings that make clear the sharp choice between the way of the Lord and the way of the world. Here these are choices facing the Church more than choices facing the individual Christian. But we are part of the Church and have to share these decisions for God and the Gospel.

There are 4 No sections under “Some challenges of today’s world”:

- No to an economy of exclusion (EG 53 - 54)
- to the new idolatry of money (EG 55 - 56)
- to a financial system which rules rather than serves (EG 57 - 58)

to the inequality which spawns violence (EG 59 - 60)

Then there are 2 Yes and 4 No sections under “Temptations faced by pastoral workers”

Yes to the challenge of a missionary spirituality (EG 78 - 80)

To the new relationships brought by Christ (EG 87 - 92)

No to selfishness and spiritual sloth (EG 81 - 83)

to a sterile pessimism (EG 84 - 86)

to spiritual worldliness (EG 93 - 97)

to warring among ourselves (EG 98 - 101)

I am not proposing to go through each of these points. I mention them in this first talk to bring out a key aspect of conversion, both for each Christian and for the Church.

Conversion is not just an experience. Conversion involves decisions. This is why the rite of baptism involves both the profession of faith and the renunciation of sin and Satan. These decisions involve clear-cut Yes to the way of Life and No to the way of death. “See, I set before you today life and prosperity; death and destruction.” (Deut. 30: 15). This is living the Gospel: “You must reckon yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.” (Rom. 6:11).

In practice this means that each one of us has to make these decisions; each group has to do this under its leaders; and each level within the Church, each community, each parish, each diocese. But at the corporate level, decisions for the way of the Lord will only be effective when there is maximum participation by the people.

We cannot convert ourselves. We cannot make ourselves go out to the extremities. This can only happen through the Holy Spirit. “At Pentecost, the Spirit made the apostles go forth from themselves and turned them into heralds of God’s wondrous deeds” (EG, para. 259). Do not look at yourselves asking if you can do what the pope asks. Look at the risen Lord, always receiving from him the Holy Spirit that he loves to pour out. “The Gospel tells us that when the disciples first went forth to preach, ‘The Lord worked with them and confirmed the message’ (Mk 16:20).” (EG, para. 275). Jesus invites us to share that experience.