

## Young People and the New Evangelization

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At the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council, the Church had a message for young people, among others, and on October 12 of this year [2012] another message was delivered to a group of young people by Benedict XVI during the Eucharistic celebration that commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of that Council.

After some words in which he presented to us the merciful face of the Father, the Pope added:

In the name of this God and of his son, Jesus, we exhort you to open your hearts to the world, to listen to the call of your brothers and sisters and to ardently put your energy in service of them. Fight against all forms of selfishness. Refuse to give free rein to violence and hatred which engenders wars and an entire entourage of evils. Be generous, pure, respectful, sincere. Build with enthusiasm a better world than that of your elders. The Church looks upon you with trust and love . . . Look upon it and you will see in it the face of Christ, the true, humble and wise hero, the Prophet of truth and of love, the companion and friend of the young.

Over the course of these fifty years, the calls made to young people have no doubt been answered by many of them, but today the overall view presented to us regarding the young does not keep us from being concerned and we should ask ourselves how we might have failed so that so many of them have left the faith or are indifferent to it. As Bishop Munilla (San Sebastian, Spain) said not long ago, more than half of young Spaniards do not believe in God nor do they know Jesus Christ. It is certainly not easy to make these "measurements" because God is bigger than our hearts and he is beyond any kind of measurement. Neither is it clear what the criteria were for this statement. We certainly cannot reduce it to merely moral criteria or participation in liturgical life. The greatest criterion is love, as expressed so well in the Council message to young people and as recalled later on by John Paul II: "We cannot delude ourselves: by our mutual love and, in particular, by our concern for those in need we will be recognized as true followers of Christ."<sup>1</sup>

Rather than focusing on the young we ought to focus on ourselves and make an examination of conscience and, with the grace of God, undertake a pastoral conversion to which the Synod has invited us. Why haven't young people seen the transmission of the Faith as Good News that gives full meaning to life? Up to what point have our apostolates and communities been a reflection of "the face of Christ, the true, humble and wise hero, the Prophet of truth and of love, the companion and friend of the young?" Have young people sensed that "look of trust and love in the Church?"

Therefore, what is most effective when dealing with the New Evangelization is to go back to the Jesus Christ of the Gospel, to know him better and to make Him the norm and direction that the Church needs to follow. The Church must be subordinate to the Gospel, not vice-versa. This also implies, as John XXIII said of the Council, opening the windows so that the ever renewed air of the person of Jesus may enter. As long as Jesus Christ is not present as a point of reference in everything having to do with the “New Evangelization,” little progress will be made, especially among young people today. Basically, it has to do with being immersed in the depth of the human experience of the young and discovering God’s presence within it. It is only through this encounter that an openness to the Gospel is possible – one that can truly touch lives. Because the New Evangelization has to do with being of service to God’s mission above all, the mission that God wants all to be saved (1 Timothy 2:3), who looks upon each person and each young person with tenderness and mercy, and who in Jesus Christ “wants all to have life, and life in abundance” (John 10:10), who does this with great humility, knowing that it is the Holy Spirit and not ourselves that are the principal players. This is also a call to be a Church that is more compassionate and closer, “a universal sacrament of salvation,” as it was defined by Vatican II.<sup>2</sup>

## **1. Young People and the New Evangelization**

The theme of Young People and the New Evangelization appears as a weak point in the *Instrumentum Laboris - The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith*. The most positive point about this theme appears in number 50 which appreciates the “freshness and enthusiasm with which some young people are leading Christian communities.”<sup>3</sup>

### **The young as the primary recipients**

Personally I believe that the new generations, no matter the continent or cultural differences, should be the privileged field of the New Evangelization, not simply as passive receivers of it, but as active agents in it, recalling the words of John Paul II when he stated that “the young are the best apostles of the young.” I think this is the case because of their innate generosity, their openness to the future, because they are on the same wavelength and because they have a special ability to grasp the difficulties of their peers, share the same difficulties and better understand their ideals and plans.

Young people are good news for the world, but we must ask ourselves how to make the Good News of Jesus become good news for them. In an era such as ours, in which young people are seeking something more and are open to spirituality, we need to educate them about meeting God in their inner selves. We need to teach about interiority. Paradoxically, this will be achieved when we facilitate the discovery of their own frailness. In a meeting of young Lasallians in Strasbourg in 1994, Gabriel Ringlet, then vice-president of the University of Louvain in Belgium, said it with these wonderful words:

I think that it is urgent today, to teach about frailness. At home, in school, in the Church, at work, in marriage. There is no dishonor in recognizing one’s own mistakes, fissures, cracks, wrinkles . . . whether you are a parent, spouse, teacher, rector, priest. Even God. The unique greatness of Christianity is to be bold enough to say that God is fragile. It is bold to say that in each person, even in the most miserable, ‘there is a crack that opens to another universe.’ The key of teaching

experience, like the key to the experience of love or of the spiritual, is in its non-fulfillment . . . What a marvelous vocation for schools today! To invite each person to reach their own inner selves. To allow each one to discover their own promised land. To encourage each one to speak. To help each one to descend to their most secret truth.<sup>4</sup>

Paul VI reminded us that to humanize is to evangelize already. We must be convinced that to work in educating free persons is already to prepare them in the faith; that we evangelize when we awaken in young people the conviction that reflects the value of their existence and the sublime truth that it is their human destiny when they help others to find the truth, to win their own freedom, to know how to listen, to love, to serve others, when they are instilled with the love of justice, fraternity, fidelity.

The weakening of historic messianism and of the great projects of the past opens young people to more modern paths, more realistic ones and leads them to the discovery of the value that daily life has. It is in the everyday where we should meet young people. As Jesuit José María Tojeria tells us, “Even the crises of the utopias have led them to cultivate commitments closer to human suffering than to despair, cynical disenchantment or even depression which many adults were drawn to.”<sup>5</sup> In fact, for many young people what is valuable is to console a person’s sorrow, to kiss the vulnerable, to bring an AIDS-sufferer to the hospital . . . It seems that daily life has more relevance than discovering the roots of suffering or seeking structural solutions.

For that reason we should give priority to experiences where hands touch poverty and human suffering – for example, missions on farming or indigenous lands, summer camps, missionary experiences in the third world, literacy programs for adults, helping immigrants to learn our language.

Young volunteers are the ones who without hesitation – and without excluding volunteers of other ages – can best sympathize with kids who are undergoing tough times. In this case it is important to link the connection of languages, tastes, and even certain aesthetics with the certainty that a real and unique encounter with someone who is suffering affects me, touches me, and does not leave me indifferent.<sup>6</sup>

To see reality, to enlighten it with the Word of God, to engage in transformative action. It seems to me that these three movements should also be present in the young who are committed to their Christian faith. These three movements can be seen in the actions of Jesus that we are called to continue in our lives. The way Jesus acted was, in a way, programmed: he saw reality, he was moved by it, and he acted. Jesus tells us in the Gospel that he did not come to judge or to condemn, but to save: therefore when he faces reality he is moved by it and he acts. I believe that this, also, is part of a kind of Gospel methodology that we should follow and pass along to young people:

***To see reality***, means to be up to date with what is happening in our world, to read newspaper and see or listen to the news, not just out of mere curiosity, but to discover God’s action in our history. This is not something theoretical or far away, we need to touch that reality and see that

young people touch it as well. Without concrete experiences, the greatest truths become nothing more than smoke.

*To be moved*, means to make our own the suffering of our neighbors. For example, those hundreds of immigrants who still risk their lives and who seek a more decent future for themselves and their families. We cannot ignore the danger of food shortages that threatens so many countries, according to Ban Ki-Moon, the UN Secretary General. To be moved is to “suffer with,” it is to be sensitive to all forms of injustice, poverty, suffering. Jesus was not afraid to show his compassionate side when he was in front of the multitude that were like sheep with a shepherd (Mark 6:34), or in front of the widow of Nain who was burying her only son (Luke 7:14), or when informed about Lazarus, his friend, he was moved to tears (John 11:35). This should lead us to “show our compassionate side” when we face any kind of human sorrow.

*To act*, is the ultimate step and the most important one. Without acting, seeing and being moved are just good intentions and sentimentality. It’s about helping each young person to be like Jesus, in the end a “man for others,” putting the needs of others before one’s own personal interests.

### **Our attitude towards young people**

For our part, it is important to get to know their world and to make an effort to enculturate in it. To get to know their needs, anxieties, questions, desires, hopes and to offer them the Gospel which is always Good News. It is important that life be the starting point because young people lose interest in the Christian message to the extent that it is presented to their minds as an ideology, something imposed from the outside by way of authority, or deductively starting from principles with no relation to concrete life. Young people today, living as they do in globalized cultures characterized by the incessant change of perspectives, in a society often marked by financial insecurity, by the glorification of violence, by immediate satisfaction, have difficulty in finding support to articulate the story of their own lives that give meaning, direction and purpose to their youthful dreams. Therefore, our principal role is to help each young person to feel that they are loved, appreciated, blessed, and that they are important to and needed by others.

The New Evangelization for young people and for those who mentor them should be a call to return to the Gospel and to discover that the central core of our faith is a personal encounter with Jesus Christ which leads to a community of disciples. It should also be noted that a community of faith is not founded only in doctrinal, liturgical or moral institutions but above all in persons who have had the same experience. This is what the disciples proclaim: “what we have seen and heard . . .” (1 John 1:3).

Our mission regarding the young is to be companions on the search, humble guides who aid in the discovery of a path and in finding meaning in life. Rather than teachers who teach from above or judges who judge and condemn from outside, we are called to be brothers and sisters who mentor young people from the inside, sharing with them the basic experience of a God who is always greater than our thoughts and who escapes our definitions, but who in Jesus of Nazareth was manifested as someone who was close, tender, affective and devoted to the needy.

The world of youth needs more than theories, testimonies and signs that may be disconnected – young people need to be open to the transcendent. The invitation of Jesus that we become

children is an invitation to open ourselves to the world of grace, tenderness, hugs, affection the way that children experience these things. Certainly the young people we teach today need above all a kind word, a gesture that reaches to their heart and it is there they will find God and open themselves to their brothers and sisters in need. The challenge will be to know how to unite this close and understanding posture with the prophetic word and the bold gesture which spring from the same love.

Today theology is returning to narrative language. In fact, Christian faith was born of some saving events. We know that by the influence of Greek logos theological discourse came into being as a narrative that ended up being an abstract formulation. Young people today invite us to recover a language that is narrative, concrete, friendly and experiential. If Jesus was able to engage in narrative theology it was because he spoke about what he had seen and heard in private with the Father. This should be our language if we want to reach the hearts of youth. A language of men and women who live lives with meaning, who have discovered God as their absolute, who live their own vocation of preferential service of the poor, deeply and joyfully, able to mentor young people in their ambiguous but sincere searching for the transcendent and for service.

The world today, particularly the world of youth, wants us to share with them a renewed face of God, the result of our personal and familiar experience with Him. It seems to me that a door that is opening for us today is that of a vocational culture which the *Instrumentum Laboris* has proposed to us – fostering a culture of life understood as vocation and this was also the idea presented by Father Pascual Chavez in his intervention:

To live this vocational culture requires an effort to develop some attitudes and special values: the promotion and defense of the sacred value of human life, trust in yourself and in your neighbor, interiority what helps you to discover in yourself and in others the presence and the action of God, availability to feel responsible for and to participate in the good of others with a posture of service and gratuity, the value of dreaming and desiring greatness, solidarity and responsibility towards others, especially the needy.<sup>7</sup>

We should approach the world of the young starting from three points:

*immersion*: an invitation to always keep in mind your own reality, to immerse ourselves in the world of the young and to enter into dialogue with them.

*a systemic view*: this is different from a Thomistic view that analyzes things in a linear way and by cause and effect. The systemic view states that a system is made up of independent elements and it presents us with a system that interacts with the environment. In reality, both of these views are needed: that of linear transmission of the historical heritage and that which emerges from perplexity affected by the range of mutations and by the interactions we are called to establish.

*individualization*: because each individual manages his or her own faith without worrying so much about heritage received as about lived personal experience.

## **2. Young religious and their thinking about the New Evangelization**

In this second part of my presentation, I would like to focus on our young religious and, as far as possible, give them a voice. I will start with a first statement from a young Brother, an indigenous Guatemalan, who died in a highway crash in 2000. Brother Adelson, as he was known, wrote to the Brother Provincial and his Council about renewing his annual vows:

I am writing to you, letting my imagination fly by listening to God's plans which run through my entire being. This plan about which I speak is that of freedom. A freedom that broadens horizons and which finds its inspiration in God's desire of freeing humankind by and for Love [ . . . ] It is in this freedom that I have decided, after discerning with a free heart, to remain in the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, by renewing my vows, trying to make love – the visible face of God – my religion, my law and my faith. (Guatemala City, Friday, October 31, 1997)

I also would like to share the statement of a young Spanish Brother as he was requesting admission to final profession.

The idea and the feeling that my life is God's, that I am in debt to Him, that I find myself in Him, that He invites me to daily fidelity to love myself and to love myself again in His Word. This is the God who has captivated me, He is the God of life who invites me to more life in abundance, for my personal life, for life among others, especially the poor. At this time I feel that the many things I do are coming together. I believe that growing in my consecrated life has to do with taking a deep look at, sharing and being transparent about this experience.

As we can see, these two statements reflect a profound thirst for God, a search for life in abundance, a liberating love, a desire to be the reflection of the face of God, sharing lived experience, an aspiration to serve humankind and the poor while being fundamentally rooted in the love of the God of life. I believe that these elements are essential for the New Evangelization that we all seek today.

It seems to me that these two statements help us to visualize that young religious today desire to live an intensive spirituality and that their desire to serve springs more from God's unconditional love and his plan of universal salvation than from looking at reality and at its needs. Surely this can lead to some ambiguity, as it did for the social commitment of generations of young religious in the past. The challenge of yesterday and today is to seek integration and balance. What is needed is to educate for the discovery of God and his call in the faces of the poor and the events of history.

But it is also important that we listen to young religious in the way that they see that we should approach the young. I now share a statement of young Spanish Brothers at a meeting in February of this year:

In the face of so many calls and requests that we receive at a time, it is important

to assess what remains at the end and how to serve the young. We believe that it is fundamental the idea of “being and creating spaces” and places where the only objective is to be with young people, using some activity as a pretext. If we do not make ourselves present, we will never be able to propose anything. We wonder what our treasure is to be dug up, that which is most important that we can offer to young people and to our society and that we cannot give up because we carry it within. Our Christian vocation in our following of Jesus is a fundamental pillar of our vocation. This must be cared for and awakened and lived day by day. Let us be transparent in this. We believe that it is not just about structures, or making changes or optimizing resources. We believe that an interior conversion is also fundamental which is what will bring us the desired renewal.

This text seems to confirm what I stated previously. The sense of gratuity and not so much that of efficiency seems to take the first place. Our involvement in the historical process that we live in, with its lights and shadows, naturally brings with it our concern for making our actions effective and in this sense we can talk about effective and transforming love, but at the same time the Scriptures present the encounter with God as the result of his creative and gratuitous initiative. Saint Paul states that “all is grace” and Bernanos has left us unforgettable pages about this in his *Diary of a Rural Priest*.<sup>8</sup> We move here in gratuitous love and the young religious seem to have grasped this experience better than did many of us in the past. Naturally here we need to also look for a vital synthesis between effectiveness and gratuity. The subjective intention is not enough; what is needed is to look for paths of transformation but without gratuitous love the fight for justice will remain maimed.

We should not forget and we should help young people to understand that Jesus in the parable on the final judgment (Matthew 25) presents us with a story of gratuitous love, where efficiency emerges as a requirement of the Lord’s gratuitous love and contemplation as the revitalizing element of historical action. There is no doubt that this combination is of key importance for the New Evangelization. But it is also important for us to focus on what we need to offer and give to young people, what they call our treasure which must come from inside. It is a shared experience. Just as following Jesus is the fundamental pillar that is lived out in everyday experience that invites ongoing conversion, it is also true that neither a simple change of structures nor optimization of resources are sufficient for this conversion.

I will conclude this section with one final statement, this one coming from young Brothers from Europe and the Middle East during a meeting held in France in August of this year. When speaking about shared mission with lay people, they are very sensitive to a dimension that we should also keep in mind, since for them sharing life goes beyond the mission and should be called “a call to build with the laity educational and Christian communities where Church communion and fraternity are lived.” They feel that what is needed is our style of being present among them to be “in a form of accompaniment and not primarily an administrative and hierarchical relationship.”

I believe that this highlights another of the characteristics that should be included in the New Evangelization. As was said on the part of the Union of Superiors General to the Assembly of the Synod of Bishops<sup>9</sup>:

Human relationships must not be overlooked. Consecrated persons who live in fraternity should be a sign of the possibility of human relationships marked by hospitality, collaboration, dialogue and peace. The leadership of a true fraternity, which we feel is a great challenge in our Institutes, is that the leaders be bearers of true human relationships in different apostolic endeavors. Apostolic experience is always more significant in our days because of the quality and authenticity of relationships.

Basically, we are talking about becoming very involved in the depths of human experience and of discovering God's presence within it. Only through that kind of encounter can openness to the Gospel be made possible – an openness that is capable of truly touching life. This reminds us of the importance of the encounter between persons over and above any institutional program. The central core of the New Evangelization is the encounter between persons, which has to do with witness and proclamation. It is also the discovery of the presence of the Spirit in others and in history.

## **Conclusion**

I began these reflections with the message of the Second Vatican Council that was aimed at young people fifty years ago. It seems to me that we can conclude with the Message that the Synod on the New Evangelization aimed at them and also with the proposal made by the Pope on this topic. The final Message of the Synod has an open pastoral and welcoming vision that shows sympathy and love for the world created by God, for human beings and their works. This language is also present when aimed at youth:

We feel close to young people in a special way, because they are a relevant part of the present and the future of humankind and of the Church. The view of the bishops towards them is anything but pessimistic. Concerned yes, but not pessimistic. Concerned because over them the most aggressive ravages of our time will converge; nevertheless, not pessimistic especially because, we want to underscore, the love of Christ is what moves the depths of history and, furthermore, because we discover in our young people deep aspirations of authenticity, truth, freedom, generosity, and we are convinced that only Christ can be the answer that is capable of satisfying these aspirations . . .<sup>10</sup>

No less pastoral and purposeful for young people and those who mentor them is the proposal presented to the Pope in view of his Apostolic Exhortation:

In the New Evangelization young people are not only the future but also the present (and the gift) of the Church. They are not merely receivers but also agents of evangelization, especially among their peers. Young people are in a phase of seeking truth and meaning in life that Jesus, who is the Truth and their friend can provide for them . . . What is needed is that evangelizers meet with young people and spend time with them, that they instruct and mentor them in the following of Jesus, that they guide them so that they discover their vocation in life and in the Church.<sup>11</sup>



Young people today with their new language help us to discover the new paths of the New Evangelization and we, for our part, need to help them to find “reasons for living and hoping” as Vatican II reminded us,<sup>12</sup> sharing with them a renewed face of God, the result of our personal experience and our familiarity with Him. But this cannot remain solely on the level of personal tranquility and pacification. In drinking from the spring of the encounter with Christ, they must discover also the transforming strength of the Gospel that opens the eyes of the world to their crucified brothers and sisters, those who suffer due to poverty’s oppression, violence, hunger, unemployment, loneliness . . . those who have no future. We do this by inviting them and making our own at the same time the invitation made to us by the martyred Argentine Bishop Angelelli: “You must keep going no matter what. Do not be afraid to get down in the mud, with one ear to the Gospel and another to the people.”

### Notes

1. Pope John Paul II, *Mane Nobiscum Domine*, 28 (October 7, 2004). Cf. John 13:35; Matthew 25:31-46.

2. Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* 48 (November 21, 1964).

3. Synod of Bishops, *The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith*, no. 50 (Vatican City: 2012).

4. Gabriel Ringlet, at the Euro Lasallian Congress, March 4-6, 1994, as quoted in the magazine *Action Educative Lasallienne* number 49, pp. 39 - 40.

5. As quoted in *Diakonia* (July-September 2005).

6. Luis A. Aranguren, “New Kinds of Poverty, Young People and Education,” in *Misión Joven*, no. 273, 1999.

7. Rev. Pascual Chávez Villanueva, S.D.B., Rector Major of the Salesian Society of St. John Bosco (Salesians), President of the Union of Superiors General (U.S.G.) while at the XIII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of the Bishops, *The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith* (October 7-28, 2012 ).

8. Georges Bernanos , *Diary of a Rural Priest* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 1937).

9. XIII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of the Bishops, *The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith* (Rome: October 7-28, 2012 ).

10. Message from the Synod on the New Evangelization (9).

11. XIII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of the Bishops, *The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith* (Rome: October 7-28, 2012 ). Summary document, par. 51.

12. Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, par. 31.