

Evangelisation and contemporaneity: guidelines for the communicative activity of the Church

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(English translation by Liam Kelly. The original version in Italian is available [here](#)).

The first communicator

First and foremost, I have been entrusted with a topic which is very dear to me: the current challenges for evangelisation and its ways of communication. In fact, the second part is somewhat rhetorical. Evangelisation by its very nature is a communication which arises from a communication. The revelation of God which finds its culmination in the event of Jesus of Nazareth died and risen is none other than the communication of the life of God which we are called to welcome within us through faith in order to be able to participate in it in a direct, active and effective way. From this original communication which can be easily analysed according to the rules of the science of modern communication, which will remain full of wonder in confirming the ways in which God communicates from time to time. This is so true that it can also be described as “pedagogy of divine communication”. From this revelation comes evangelisation as the communication of an event that has touched someone personally so much as to make that person responsible for sharing their faith with others.

I will go straight to the matter in hand. When the Gospel speaks of the preaching of Jesus it highlights that the reaction of the listeners is to discover that Jesus’ teaching is full of authority and is new (cf. *Mark* 1:27). As can be seen, it is closely connected with the revelation which allows us to always discover something new and unprecedented which stimulates our pastoral activity to overcome the temptation of repetitiveness. From Jesus to the apostles and down to us, it is surprising to find an incredible continuity. What the Church does is

nothing other than the proclamation of Jesus Christ who died and rose for our salvation. Taking up again some of the expressions of Peter's speech enables us to understand the responsibility the Church has and the evangelisation which we are called to continue.

Almost echoing the Pentecost speech, Peter, in his visit to the centurion Cornelius, interprets the universal value of the kerygma: "Then Peter began to speak to them, 'I understand that truly God is impartial, but that in every nation one that fears him and does what is righteous is acceptable to him. You know the message which he sent to the children of Israel proclaiming peace through Jesus Christ – he is Lord of all – the word which spread throughout Judaea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism which John announced: Jesus of Nazareth, whom God anointed with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went around doing good and healing all who were held in the power of the devil, because God was with him. Now we are witnesses to everything he did throughout the countryside of Judaea and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, yet on the third day God raised him to life and allowed him to be seen, not by the whole people but only by us whom God had chosen beforehand as witnesses. We ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He has commanded us to announce to the people and to bear witness that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets bear witness to this, that all who believe in him receive forgiveness of sins through his name'" (*Acts* 10:34-43).

How can we not see in these words the "first proclamation" that we are called to make? Peter's words are the striking synthesis of the entire kerygma. The Church does not evangelise because it is faced with the great challenge of secularism in its various manifestations; because even the great problem of religious sects in fact belongs to this process which reduces personal choices to relativism. The Church evangelises because it must be obedient to the Lord's

command to bring the Gospel to every creature. In this simple thought is condensed the plan of all time and above all for the coming years. The Church exists to bring the Gospel in all times to every person, wherever they are. Jesus' command is so crystal clear that it does not allow for any misunderstandings or alibis. Those who believe in his word are sent into the streets of the world to proclaim that the promised salvation has now become reality. The proclamation, however, must be combined with a lifestyle that allows us to recognise the Lord's disciples wherever they are. The communication, therefore, is enriched by a further element: the lifestyle which is the criterion of credibility of the proclamation made.

As can be seen – but it would be interesting to check these texts with those of Paul in his letters, starting with the speech at the Areopagus (*Acts* 17:22-31) – the content of the kerygma is *salvation*. It would be embarrassing to retrace all the texts of the New Testament to check how omnipresent and decisive is this proclamation. Paul simply speaks of his preaching as “this message of salvation” (*Acts* 13:26); the conclusion of Peter's speech is simply “Save yourselves from this perverse generation” (*Acts* 2:40); the believers of the first community are simply described as “those who were being saved” (*Acts* 2:47). If this proclamation is so fundamental, the question naturally arises: why has our preaching today forgotten salvation? This is no small observation; salvation is the great forgotten. Perhaps we need to welcome with greater awareness the call of Pope Francis, when he speaks about a form of “self-absorbed promethean *neopelagianism* of those who ultimately trust only in their own powers and feel superior to others” (*Evangelii Gaudium* 94).

The cornerstones

It is appropriate to pause to include another reflection which touches on the identity of Christian life. This has a dual dimension: *communion* and

evangelisation. It seems to me that in the decades following the Council we rightly put great emphasis on the first reality. This led to a decisive reiteration of the renewal of the Christian community. Thus, we have rediscovered the need for community and communion. In a word, the Church needed to gather together to answer the great question which Paul VI insistently posed at the start of his pontificate: “Who are you, Church? And what do you say about yourself?”.

Ten years after the Council, Paul VI understood that it was necessary to take a further step: evangelisation. *Evangelii nuntiandi* maintains its relevance to this day. If we want to understand the need for evangelisation in our times, it is necessary to take up that letter again and re-read it in the light of Pope Francis’ *Evangelii Gaudium*. Today, evangelisation and the transmission of the faith are placed in the foreground, because we experience first-hand the consequences of the crisis. Suffice to see the results we all complain about, especially in the West: participation in liturgical life is reduced to very low percentages; baptisms are decreasing and cohabitation rather than religious weddings is increasing; catechesis for First Communion still sees significant percentages but these are halved for the Sacrament of Confirmation; young people have no passion for the faith and vocations to priestly and religious life are minimal...agnosticism is growing, but above all there is indifference, which brings with it individualistic behaviour increasingly devoid of social responsibility. In short, the list could easily become a long litany of negative aspects.

Evangelising in culture

I am not a person who gives in to pessimism and I know that the history of the past would show how in other times we have experienced similar situations and, perhaps, even with greater violence. I like to see the strength of the Holy Spirit who still today urges us to find new forms of evangelisation and still sparks many beautiful testimonies of faith full of enthusiasm and dynamism. A great

challenge, however, awaits everyone: the *digital culture*. We need to understand that we are at the beginning of a new culture and that evangelisation requires us to be aware of this great challenge. Those who today are twenty years old are digital natives; that is, they are children of this new culture which imposes new languages and consequently new behaviours. Once language is changed, people's behaviour also changes accordingly. If our communication focuses on just one aspect, it is obvious to check the possible manipulation that derives from it. For decades, much of the communication regarding the Catholic Church was exclusively about the sexual life. There is no point in continuing our discussion if the interlocutor thinks that the whole life of Christians is stuck on the Sixth Commandment. The itch for scandal, the rush to give voice without waiting for the necessary checks, as well as the short-sightedness for not wanting to give voice to many other expressions imposes a communication that betrays every rule of communication itself.

The digital culture presents many positive aspects combined with great limitations. With digital we overcome the categories in which we have always thought: space and time. These are replaced by "now" and "immediately". Communication takes place simultaneously with multiple people, with groups, and reaches the entire world in an instant. The desire to let everyone know who we are, what we do, where we are, who our friends are, is growing...privacy disappears because *Facebook* is the personal diary placed in everyone's hands. If once upon a time we ran to get a photo of an important person, today we live more by the need for a *selfie* where, as the term itself says, the important thing is "me" with others...It is no coincidence that the sense of a strong narcissism is growing in a pathological way, so much so as to lead some philosophers to speak openly of an "ère du vide", the era of emptiness! How to be Christian in the time of the digital culture? How to evangelise in this culture? These are not obvious questions, nor should they be left until tomorrow. If we are not capable of

addressing this question, it is difficult to think that we can be effective in evangelising in the coming decades.

However, I would like to be honest. I am not here to talk about communication techniques of evangelisation, because it is not the techniques that make our ministry fruitful. Evangelisation being the very nature of the Church is rather the consequence of an *encounter*. First, we need to talk about our encounter with the Lord: was there really an encounter? When did I encounter the Lord? What impact did that encounter have on me? These questions are not rhetorical at all; they are rather the need to return to our origins; to the moment of that encounter, from which everything originates. Think about how many times the evangelists speak of the desire to meet the Lord: the rich young man “runs”, Bartimaeus “jumps up and runs”...“running” characterises the enthusiasm and strong desire for the encounter. The example of the deacon Philip simply reiterates the same thing (*Acts* 8:26-40). I don’t feel like we’re running, the impression is rather that we are still, inert, tired...while the Word of God “spreads quickly” (*2 Thess.* 3:1) in solitude.

To evangelise, therefore, in the light of our Christian identity and as a consequence of our encounter with the Lord. In some ways, we are invited to enter the great mystery of personal existence; of its meaning and consequences for the people who make up my community. We still have a long way to go to make our being a community visible. The synodal path undertaken in recent years does nothing but reiterate this dimension of the Church. We must not be afraid. Being a community of faith, hope and charity is already present every time we celebrate the Eucharist. The Eucharistic mystery – and I underline the term mystery – already brings with it our being the people of God called to bear witness to the life of God. The Eucharist allows us to experience first-hand the reality of our being baptised: on the one hand, the call to share the very life of God, and on

the other, the responsibility of sharing, that is, evangelisation. In the community, loneliness is overcome by the strength of the love that shares and involves.

Christian truth full of hope

Let us seek to take a further step in understanding our theme. I would like to think I am wrong, but I often have the impression that we have forgotten that the main task that Jesus entrusted to his Church is to bring the Gospel to everyone. I fear that the insistence, for example, on the liturgical and sacramental dimension has made us lose sight of the need for evangelisation. Of course, the Eucharistic celebration and especially the homily also have great value in evangelisation. I think about how our homilies should be a true instrument of evangelisation, especially at crucial moments: the celebration of baptism and funerals; of First Communion and marriage...all moments when many people often far from the Church come closer and could be struck by our word. All this, however, should not make us lose sight of the fundamental objective: to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ so that everyone may have salvation.

The apostle Peter allows us to grasp in an overall view what constitutes the *essence* of the Christian faith, the *freedom* of the believer who approaches it and the need to *give reason for it* to others to make them participate in a movement full of meaning which brings a definitive word to personal existence. Venturing gradually into the text will allow us to discern the progressive stages that have led believers, over the course of their two thousand years of history, to be able to explain their faith in Christ.

In this sense, the teaching which the Council fathers provided in the constitution *Gaudium et Spes* is still alive and current: "The church is not motivated by earthly ambition but is interested in one thing only – to carry on the work of Christ under the guidance of the holy Spirit, who came into the world to

bear witness to the truth, to save and not to judge, to serve and not to be served. In every age, the church carries the responsibility of reading the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel, if it is to carry out its task. In language intelligible to every generation, it should be able to answer the ever-recurring questions which people ask about the meaning of this present life and of the life to come, and how one is related to the other” (*Gaudium et Spes* 3-4).

The mission of the Church, as can be seen, is to maintain faith in what it has received from its Lord: to be able to transmit it with a proclamation that reaches everyone, without any distinction, because the content of its message consists in the truth about personal existence. A truth not deduced from personal experience but brought and made known through revelation by the Son of God; for this reason, it is “new” and given with “authority”. This dimension, which seems obvious, constitutes the founding expression of the Church’s mission. Without the mission there is no Church, but the mission is the proclamation of a truth that has been delivered with the responsibility of keeping it dynamically intact until the end of time.

As can be seen from these first remarks, there are two elements that return as constants: one the one hand, the mission of the Church in its proclamation of truth; on the other, the recipient of the announcement: our contemporary. Forgetting just one of these two components or limiting the space to just one would inevitably lead to an imbalance which would in fact always compromise the mission of the believing community. The transmission of the Word of God must take place with fidelity to the content, but without forgetting to whom it is addressed. What is at stake is not only communication with the contemporary, who has the right to receive a salvific content to adhere to and which involves that person to the point of allowing him/her a radical choice of freedom and faith;

but it also affects the vitality with which the content must be transmitted to be effective for everyone.

Just as other eras have experienced their difficulties, so ours, too, must confront its own. Just as in the past an intense work of evangelisation was begun, so too today the Church must become aware of the great commitment that the new evangelisation requires. Paul VI wrote with such foresight and prophetic force: “The world, in spite of the general opinion to the contrary, and although it gives every outward sign of denying God, is in fact seeking God by strange ways and is in desperate need of God. This world is looking for preachers of the gospel to speak to it of God whom they themselves experience as close to them, as though seeing him who is invisible. The world expects of us, and demands of us, a life of simplicity, the habit of prayer, charity towards all and especially towards children and the poor. It expects obedience and humility, forgetfulness of self and abnegation. If these signs of sanctity are wanting, our words will not reach the hearts of men of our time. There is a grave danger that they will be vain and sterile” (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* 76). Opening the heart and mind of our contemporary so that they can discover the importance of God in their lives and believe in Jesus Christ: this, if you want, is the objective of evangelisation.

We return to the great theme of integration into cultures, transforming them and directing them to the fulness of truth. The Church, while having the identical content, has been able over the centuries to transform it to be understood in its proclamation. For the effectiveness of the proclamation which is a proclamation of salvation, it is not possible that the effort to always find new expressive forms capable of communicating the only truth of revelation fail. Precisely because of its salvific value, we are obliged to find all the roads and follow all the paths to reach men and women wherever they may be in order to be a living transmission of the word of the Lord. This task is not at all theoretical, on the contrary. In fact,

it forces us to reflect on the condition of our contemporary whose identity is very different from past decades.

The occasion of the Jubilee is nothing other than a further moment of challenge to meet with a language that allows us to attract attention and interest in the faith. Hope as a universal experience has been placed in our hands to discern how it can become the new language of faith. Clothing the proclamation of faith with the clothes of hope is not a strategic technique invented by the theologian. It is, rather, the attempt to pursue the paths that are within reach to account for what is present in us. Our interlocutor often does not believe, but he certainly hopes. Here is the real challenge that the Church is called to take up: reviving its own hope which seems to be reduced to the embers and no longer being a flame that gives meaning to life; and to participate by communicating with our contemporary on common and shared ground. In the end, we feel the urgency for an anthropology that is capable of corresponding to the new vision of humanity now outlined by the progress of science and technology. In short, if it is possible to operate on the heart even via the Internet from one part of the planet to another without the doctor being next to the patient, this means that our vision of the world and of humanity inevitably changes...it is precisely this that imposes on the believer the responsibility for a new vision of anthropology, more human and projected towards the certainty of the future offered by Christian hope.

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