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Laity for the New Evangelization

“The Church today ought to take a giant step forward in her evangelization effort, and enter into a new stage of history in her missionary dynamism”.¹ This statement in *Christifideles Laici* is still very relevant today, and the role of the laity in this process continues to be irreplaceable. Christ said “you too go into my vineyard” (*Mt* 20: 3-4), and this invitation should be seen as a clear call to an ever-growing number of lay men and women to take on their responsibility in the life and mission of the Church. This refers to their responsibility in the life and mission of all the Christian communities – dioceses and parishes, and ecclesial associations and movements. The engagement of lay people in evangelization is already changing the life of the Church², and this is a major sign of hope for the Church.

The enormity of the harvest to be collected for the sake of the Gospel today gives a note of urgency to the Divine Master’s missionary mandate: “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation” (*Mk* 16:15). Unfortunately, nowadays a mentality of relativism has taken root and is spreading even among Christians. This creates a great deal of confusion for our mission. Some examples are the following: the tendency to replace mission with a kind of dialogue in which all positions are equal; the tendency to reduce evangelization to human advancement and no more, being convinced that it is enough to help people to be better people or to be more faithful to their own religion; a false concept of respect for the freedom of others that refrains from teaching the need for conversion. These and other doctrinal errors are addressed in the encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (1990), then in the declaration *Dominus Iesus* (2000) and later in the *Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church* (2007) issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. These documents deserve to be studied in depth. Evangelization is an explicit mandate from the Lord and therefore it is not of secondary importance. It is the reason why the Church is a sacrament of salvation. *Redemptoris Missio* tells us that evangelization is a question of faith, “an accurate indicator of our faith in Christ and his love for us”.³ As Saint Paul says, “the love of Christ impels us” (*2 Cor* 5:14). It is therefore not unreasonable to stress that “there can be no true evangelization without the explicit proclamation of Jesus as Lord”⁴ by word and through

¹ John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, n. 35.

² Cf. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio*, n. 2.

³ *Ibid.*, n.11.

⁴ John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, n. 19.

a life of witness. “People today put more trust in witnesses than in teachers, in experience than in teaching, and in life and action than in theories”.⁵ Those who know Christ have a duty to make him known, and those who do not know him have the right to receive this news. Saint Paul understood this well when he wrote: “If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel!” (*1Cor* 9:16). This missionary concern should always be with each person who has been baptised.

In an address delivered in the year 2000, the future Pope Benedict XVI made some very good points that invite us to return to the essential. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was speaking about evangelization, and he set out from a basic premise: “the true problem of our times is the ‘Crisis of God’, the absence of God, disguised by an empty religiosity [...] 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 (cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church)”.⁶ He also said: “Speaking about God and speaking with God must always go together”.⁷ Prayer is irreplaceable as the well-spring from which every true and authentic missionary initiative is born. The subject of God then becomes the subject of Jesus Christ: “Only in Christ and through Christ does the subject of God become truly concrete: Christ is Emmanuel, the God-with-us—the concretization of the ‘I am’, the response to Deism”.⁸ Taking this as his basic premise, Cardinal Ratzinger formulated three laws that guide the process of evangelization in the Church, laws that are well worth recalling. He called the first one *the law of expropriation*. We Christians are not the proprietors. We are humble servants of God’s action in the world. Saint Paul wrote: “For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus’ sake” (*2Cor* 4:5). This is why Cardinal Ratzinger strongly emphasised that “evangelizing is not merely a way of speaking, but a form of living: living in the listening and giving voice to the Father. ‘He will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak’, says the Lord about the Holy Spirit (*Jn* 16:13) [...] The Lord and the Spirit build the Church, communicate through the Church. The proclamation of Christ, the proclamation of the Kingdom of God presupposes listening to his voice in the voice of the Church. ‘Not to speak on one’s own authority’ means: to speak in the mission of the Church”.⁹

⁵ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio*, n. 42.

⁶ J. Ratzinger, *La nuova evangelizzazione*, “L’Osservatore Romano”, 11-12 dicembre 2000, p. 11. [Address of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger on the Jubilee of Catechists and Religion Teachers, 10 December 2000]

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

Evangelization, therefore, is never a private affair. Behind it there is always God and there is always the Church. Cardinal Ratzinger said: “We ourselves cannot draw people. We must acquire them by God for God. All methods are empty without the foundation of prayer. The word of proclamation must always be steeped in an intense life of prayer”.¹⁰ This certitude gives us great support and it gives us the courage needed to deal with the challenges that are presented to the Church by the world.

The second law of evangelization springs from the parable of the *mustard seed*, “the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs” (*Mk* 4:31-32). “All great things begin in humility”,¹¹ Cardinal Ratzinger emphasised. In fact, God is particularly fond of all that is small: the “remnant of Israel” that brings hope to the chosen people; the “little flock” of disciples that are told by the Lord never to fear because it is to them that the Father wishes to give his Kingdom (cf. *Lk* 12:32). The parable of the mustard seed tells us that those who proclaim the Gospel must be humble. They must not expect to obtain immediate results – neither qualitatively nor quantitatively. The law of great numbers is not the law of the Church. God is Lord of the harvest, and it is God who decides the rhythm, times and method for sowing. This law keeps us from becoming discouraged in our missionary engagement, yet it does not exempt us from giving everything we can. We are reminded by the apostle to the gentiles: “whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully” (*2Cor* 9:6).

The third law of evangelization is *the law of the grain of seed that dies* in order to bring forth fruit (cf. *Jn* 12:24). In evangelization, the logic of the Cross is always present. Cardinal Ratzinger said: “Jesus did not redeem the world with beautiful words but with his suffering and death. His passion is a never-ending source of life for the world; the passion gives power to his words”.¹² This explains the importance we find in evangelization of the witness of martyrs for the faith. Tertullian was right when he wrote: “the more you kill the more we are. The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church”.¹³ The witness of faith sealed by the blood of so many martyrs is the great spiritual patrimony of the Church and a shining sign of hope for its future. Christians can join Saint Paul in saying: “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies”. (*2Cor* 4: 8-10).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Tertullian, *Liber apologeticus* 50, 13.

The importance of the tasks facing the Church at the start of the third millennium of the Christian era can make us feel inadequate and helpless. Our work for God and the Gospel in the world is constantly being hindered and contested by various hostile forces. However, we are heartened by words of hope by Benedict XVI. In a homily on “God’s failures” given when the Swiss bishops were on their *ad limina* visit, he said: “initially God always fails, he lets human freedom exist and this freedom constantly says ‘no’; but God’s imagination, the creative power of his love, is greater than the human ‘no’[...] What does all this mean for us? First of all, it means one certainty: God does not fail. He ‘fails’ continuously, but for this very reason he does not fail, because through this he finds new opportunities for far greater mercy and his imagination is inexhaustible. He does not fail because he finds ever new ways to reach people and to open wider his great house so that it is completely filled”.¹⁴ This is why we should never lose hope. The Successor of Peter assures us that: “even today the message spreads along the roads to the very ends of the earth and people crowd into God’s hall for his banquet. Today too, he will find new ways to call men and women. He wants to have us with him as his messengers and servants”.¹⁵

¹⁴ Benedict XVI, *Homily during Mass with the Swiss Bishops*, 7 November 2006.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*