

How to establish a welcome cell

“Sacred Scripture seldom speaks of Saint Joseph, but when it does, we often find him resting, as an angel reveals God’s will to him in a dream. As Christians, we are called, just as Saint Joseph was, to make a home for Jesus”.¹ And in Jesus’ house there’s room for everyone. Thus, the image of Saint Joseph as a welcoming leader reminds us of the importance of hospitality, of the ability to welcome others as they are.

The new evangelization, which the last few popes have strongly advocated for, places our Church in a new disposition, one that calls for acceptance, dialogue and proclamation to a culture and society with deep spiritual expectations. Our society is undergoing a profound transformation. Our ecclesial structure, which used to fit perfectly in another era, is no longer suitable. This is what the history of peoples, as well as that of the Church, keeps showing us.

The men and women of today are in a state of constant change: driven by current events and the development of new technologies, new ways of thinking appear and thus reveal the unsuitability of old structures to new situations. There is, in fact, a permanent tension between life and institutions: because humans are living beings, they never stop evolving, questioning, discovering, and endeavoring.

On the other hand, institutions are necessary for the functioning of society, and their purpose is essential in that it allows for the channeling, ordering and organizing of this ever-bustling life. Without creativity, humans are like the living dead; without institutions, societies turn to anarchy. Though this tension between life and institutions is permanent, it becomes clearer and more visible in specific circumstances, particularly in times of crisis such as those that we are currently experiencing.

The first and foremost condition of any evangelization effort is undoubtedly the ability to welcome, cordially and with no ulterior ends, all people, especially those who are going through the pangs of a personal, familial, or existential crisis. Therefore, we need to be creative in renewing our way to welcome others, keeping in mind their specific traits and pre-existing values. “The way we welcome others is the terrain on which we’ll be able to graft the explicit proclamation of Christ Savior of the world, with friendly words, at the most opportune moment and with suitable means.”²

Don PiGi, the founder of the Parish Cells of Evangelization, dreamed of a community that would be lively, joyful, and in love with Jesus, a community where everyone can discover, or rediscover, our common vocation to proclaim the Good News by appropriating our Lord’s last words to His disciples: “*Love one another as I have loved you and make disciples of all nations*”.³ Here lies the spiritual testament that Jesus left us. The mission statement of the Missionary Pole at Fontainebleau is an excellent synthesis of these two great commandments, “Love as Jesus loves and make disciples”.⁴ If these two commandments are to be my starting point, what should I therefore set as a priority in the evangelization of my oïkos?

Through the “net” system, we have learned the basis for all evangelization: building a bridge of friendship through prayer and service. The first and most important form of service we owe to the person we wish to evangelize to is, in my humble opinion, to welcome them without judging them, and keeping in mind that the paradigmatic pastoral model of the loving way in which the Father welcomes his children is His son, Jesus.

An event in my own life opened my eyes to what it means to fully welcome others as they are. In 1990 I was diagnosed with last stage melano-carcinoma. A nurse in my workplace took notice of my obvious state of (existential) suffering and took me aside, gave me a tissue and said nothing else, choosing silence instead.

¹ Pope Francis’s address in Manilla, 16 January 2015

² CEI, « The missionary stance of our parishes in a changing world », #6.

³ Cf. John 13, 34 et Matt. 28, 19.

⁴ Jn 13, 34 et Mt 28, 19

“Come with me to a solitary place and rest a while”⁵. Faced with this unexpected and simple act of kindness, I burst into tears. In that very moment, my heart opened up to a greater form of love, that of God made present to me by this nurse’s very simple gesture. This divine welcome on the nurse’s part was the prelude to a personal and significant encounter with Jesus a few months later.

Gaining awareness: « Silence shakes up our conscience ». Through silence accompanied by a meaningful act, we give others a space to express themselves, to exist. No advice, no reproach... just « listen and be silent ». To love is to let others exist. As St. John Paul II often reminded us: « The mission of the Church consists essentially of offering people not to “have more” but to “be more”, by waking our consciences through the Gospel. Authentic human development must be based on an ever-deeper evangelization ». ⁶

God’s silence, at the heart of human suffering, is a loving silence and one close to our suffering. This is the essence of hospitality. This is the language of the Holy Spirit. We carry within ourselves the expectations of humanity which unknowingly thirsts for God when it longs for peace, justice, and love. « Today, it is no longer a lack of social life which pushes us towards this refuge, but its exuberance. The excitement, the noise, the restless agitation, the façade, the crowds threaten the interiority of man. He lacks silence, with its authentic interior words; he lacks order, prayer, peace. He is missing himself. To regain his spiritual mastery and joy, he must be able to face himself. This is a great and important reality which is of critical value for our old society; a society which is still alive, but that today so greatly needs to draw new vigor and splendor from its Christian roots ». ⁷

As St. Augustine said : « Love and do what you will. If you keep silence, do it out of love. If you cry out, do it out of love ». ⁸ Yes, the one we welcome is first of all a brother, a sister, a person with their own history, carrying their own blessings and burdens alike. To welcome others through empathic listening is to carry out God’s mercy, without judgement. « Love and do what you will ».

« Do not judge and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned ». ⁹ Christ does not tell us that we are not allowed an opinion, but rather that we will be judged with the same measure we use to judge others. Am I ready to welcome those whose principles are radically opposed to mine?

What we can do as the Church, since her primary mission is evangelization. ¹⁰ « If society as a whole no longer offers a Christian environment, the Church must form cells where we can experiment and practice on a smaller scale the great living space of the Church, by supporting and sustaining one another, by walking together ». ¹¹

During a German radio broadcast in 1969, Joseph Ratzinger – the future Benedict XVI – gave us a glimpse of a Church that is small, simplified, and focused on what is essential: to welcome everyone as the Father welcomes back the prodigal son.

« We are at a huge turning point in the evolution of mankind. From today’s crisis will emerge a Church that has lost a great deal. It will become small and will have to start pretty much all over again. It will no longer have use of the buildings it erected in its years of prosperity. The reduction in the number of the faithful will lead to it losing an important part of its social privileges. It will start over with small groups and movements and a minority that will place faith back at the center of the experience. It will be a more spiritual Church and it will

⁵ Mark 6, 31.

⁶ John-Paul II. Redemptoris mission, #58.

⁷ La Documentation Catholique 46e année — T. LXI — Numéro 1436. — 15 novembre 1964 — Col. 1441 — 1448

⁸ Iohannis Epistulam ad Parthos tractatus decem, treaty VII, 8

⁹ Luke 6, 37.

¹⁰ Evangelii nuntiandi, #5.

¹¹ On the new types of communities see Peter Seewald’s “Salt of the earth”, pages 255-256.

not claim a political mandate flirting with the Right one minute and the Left the next. It will be poor and will become the Church of the destitute. This process will be long, but when all the suffering is past, a great power will emerge from a more spiritual and simple Church. At this moment, men will realise that they live in a world of indescribable loneliness and, having lost sight of God, they will perceive the horror of their impoverishment. Then, and only then, they will see that small flock of faithful as something completely new: they will see it as a source of hope for themselves, the answer they had always secretly been searching for ».

This answer is the welcome which God extends and by which he settles in the hearts of men. The spiritual life which St. Joseph shows us is then not a path that explains, but one that welcomes. Joseph leaves his reasoning aside to make room for what is happening and, as mysterious as these events may seem to him, he welcomes Mary and her child, takes responsibility for them, and comes to terms with his own history. It is only by welcoming in this way that we can glimpse at a greater story and deeper meaning.

You Joseph, Father of hospitality and welcome, you did not fully understand what God asked of you, but you welcomed Jesus's coming as a gift from the Father with unlimited trust. Help us to welcome others as they are, without exclusion, with partialness towards the weak because they are chosen by God. St. Joseph, receive our prayer for all the children of the world. Amen.