



Cardinal Cantalamessa Second Lenten Sermon 2023

“The gospel is the power of God for salvation” – Rom 1:16

From the *Evangelii Nuntiandi* of Saint Paul VI to the *Evangelii gaudium* of the current Supreme Pontiff, the theme of evangelization has been at the center of attention of the papal Magisterium. The great encyclicals of Saint John Paul II have contributed to it, as has the establishment of the Pontifical Council for Evangelization, promoted by Benedict XVI. The same concern can be seen in the title given to the constitution for the reform of the Curia *Praedicate Evangelium* and in the denomination "Dicastery for Evangelization", given to the ancient Congregation of Propaganda Fide. The same purpose is now mainly assigned to the Synod of the Church. It is to it, that is, to evangelization, that I would like to dedicate this meditation.

The shortest and most meaningful definition of evangelization is the one found in the First Letter of Peter. In it, the apostles are defined as: "those who proclaimed the Gospel to you in the Holy Spirit" (1 Pet 1:12). What is essential about evangelization is expressed there, namely its content – the Gospel – and its method – in the Holy Spirit.

To find out what is meant by the word "Gospel", the safest way is to ask the one who first used this Greek word and made it canonical in Christian language, the apostle Paul. We are fortunate to possess an exposition in his hand that explains what he means by "Gospel", and it is the Letter to the Romans. The theme of it is announced with the words: "I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (Rom 1:16).

For the success of every new effort at evangelization it is vital to have clear the essential nucleus of the Christian proclamation, and no one has brought this to light better than the apostle in the first three chapters of the Letter to the Romans. From understanding and applying his message to the current situation depends, I am convinced, whether children of God will be born from our efforts, or whether we will have to repeat bitterly with Isaiah: "We conceived, we felt the pains as



if we were to give birth: it was only wind; we have not brought salvation to the earth and no inhabitants were born in the world" (Is 26:18).

The message of the Apostle in those first three chapters of his Letter can be summarized in two points: first, what is the situation of humanity before God following sin; second, how one gets out of it, that is, how one is saved by faith and made a new creature. Let us follow the Apostle in his close reasoning. Better, let's follow the Spirit who speaks through him. Anyone who has traveled by plane will have heard the announcement from time to time: "Fasten your seat belts because we are about to enter an area of turbulence". The same warning should be sounded to those who are about to read the following words of Paul.

God's wrath is revealed from heaven against all impiety and all injustice of men who stifle the truth in injustice. In fact, from the creation of the world onward, his invisible perfections can be contemplated with the intellect in the works he has accomplished, like his eternal power and divinity; therefore they are inexcusable, because, knowing God, they neither gave him glory nor gave him thanks as to God, but they wandered in their reasonings and their dull minds became darkened. While they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for the image and figure of corruptible man, of birds; of quadrupeds and reptiles (Rom 1, 18-23).

The fundamental sin, the primary object of divine wrath, is identified, as can be seen, in asebeia, that is, in impiety. In what exactly this impiety consists, the Apostle immediately explains, saying that it consists in the refusal to "glorify" and "thank" God. Strange! This fact of not glorifying and thanking God enough seems to us, yes, a sin, but not so terrible and mortal. We need to understand what lies behind it: the refusal to recognize God as God, not giving him the consideration that is due to him. It consists, we could say, in "ignoring" God, where ignoring does not mean so much "not knowing that he exists" as "doing as if he didn't exist".

In the Old Testament we hear Moses cry out to the people: "Know that God is God!" (cf Dt 7, 9) and a psalmist takes up this cry, saying: "Recognize that the Lord is God: he made us and we belong to him!" (Ps 100, 3). Reduced to its germinal nucleus, sin is to deny this "recognition"; it is the creature's attempt to erase, on its own initiative, almost by arrogance, the infinite difference that exists between it and God. Sin attacks, in this way, the very root of things; it is a "smothering of truth in injustice". It is something much darker and more terrible than man can imagine or say.



If men knew while alive, as they will know at the moment of death, what it means to reject God, they would die of fright.

This refusal has taken shape, we have heard, in idolatry, by which the creature is worshiped instead of the Creator. In idolatry man does not "accept" God, but makes himself a god; it is he who decides about God, not vice versa. The roles are reversed: man becomes the potter and God the vessel which he models as he pleases (cf. Rom 9:20ff). Today this ancient attempt has taken on a new look. It does not consist in putting something - not even oneself - in the place of God, but in abolishing, purely and simply, the role indicated by the word "God". Nihilism! Nothing in place of God. But there is no need to dwell on this at this moment; it would interrupt listening to the Apostle who instead continues his tight reasoning.

Paul continues his indictment by showing the fruits that flow, on a moral level, from the rejection of God. From it derives a general dissolution of morals, a veritable "torrent of perdition" which drags humanity into ruin. And here the Apostle draws an impressive picture of the vices of pagan society. However, the most important thing to retain from this part of the Pauline message is not this list of vices, present, among other things, also among the stoic moralists of the time. The disconcerting thing at first sight is that St. Paul makes of all this moral disorder, not the cause, but the effect of divine wrath. The formula that states this unequivocally returns three times:

Therefore God gave them over to impurity. [...] For this reason God has abandoned them to infamous passions [...]. Because they have despised the knowledge of God, God has given them over to a depraved understanding (Rom 1, 24.26.28).

God certainly does not "want" such things, but he "allows" them to make man understand where his rejection leads. "These actions – writes Saint Augustine – although they are punishment, are also sins, because the penalty of iniquity is that it is itself iniquity; God intervenes to punish evil and from his own punishment other sins swarm".

There are no distinctions before God between Jews and Greeks, between believers and pagans: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23). The Apostle is so keen to clarify this point that he dedicates the entire second chapter and part of the third of his Letter to it. It is all of humanity that is in this situation of perdition, not this or that individual or people.



Where is the timeliness of the Apostle's message I was talking about in all this? It lies in the remedy that the Gospel proposes for this situation. It does not consist in engaging in a struggle for the moral reform of society, for the correction of its vices. For him, it would be like wanting to uproot a tree by starting to remove the leaves or the most protruding branches, or worrying about eliminating the fever, rather than curing the evil that causes it.

Translated into current language, this means that evangelization does not begin with morals, but with the kerygma; in the language of the New Testament, not with the Law, but with the Gospel. And what is the content, or core, of it? What does Paul mean by "Gospel" when he says it "is the power of God to everyone who believes"? Believe in what? "God's righteousness has been revealed!" (Rom 3, 21): this is what is new. It's not men who suddenly changed their lives and customs and started doing good. The new fact is that, in the fullness of time, God acted, he broke the silence, he was the first to extend his hand to sinful man.

But let us now listen directly to the Apostle who explains to us what this "action" of God consists of. They are words that we have read or listened to hundreds of times, but we love to listen to the tunes of a beautiful symphony over and over again:

All have sinned and fall short of God's glory, but are justified freely by his grace, by virtue of the redemption accomplished by Christ Jesus. God preordained him to serve as an instrument of atonement through faith, in his blood, in order to manifest his justice, after the tolerance used towards past sins in the time of divine patience. He manifests his justice in the present time, to be just and to justify those who have faith in Jesus (Rom 3, 23-26).

I would like to reassure everyone right away: I don't intend to give yet another sermon on justification by faith. There is a danger in insisting solely on this issue. What Paul presents to us is not a doctrine, but an event, indeed a person. We are not saved generically "by grace": we are saved by the grace of Christ Jesus; we are not generically justified "through faith": we are justified through faith in Christ Jesus. Everything has changed "by virtue of the redemption wrought by Christ Jesus". The true article with which the Church stands or falls (the famous *Articulum stantis et cadentis Ecclesiae*) is not a doctrine, but a person.

I am left speechless every time I re-read this part of the Letter to the Romans. After having described, in the tones that we have heard, the desperate situation of humanity, the Apostle has the courage to say that it has radically changed because of what happened a few years earlier,



in an obscure part of the Roman Empire , by a single man, who died moreover on a cross! Only a "sharp" from the Holy Spirit, a flash from him, could give a man the courage to believe and proclaim this unheard-of thing. Especially since this same man once became "enraged" if anyone dared to proclaim such a thing in his presence. Deacon Stephen had paid the price...

In us the shock is cushioned by twenty centuries of confirmations, but let's think of how the Apostle's words must have sounded to educated people of the time. He was aware of it himself; for this he felt the need to say: "I am not ashamed of the Gospel" (Rom 1:16). Indeed, one could be ashamed of it. I fail to understand how honest historians can believe (as happened for a long time) that Paul drew his certainty from Hellenistic cults, or I don't know from what other source. Who had ever imagined, or could humanly imagine, such a thing?

But let's go back to our specific intention which is evangelization. What can we learn from the word of God just heard again? To the pagans, Paul does not say that the remedy for their idolatry lies in once again questioning the universe in order to go back from creatures to God; to the Jews, he does not say that the remedy lies in going back to observing the Law of Moses better. The remedy is not up or back; it is forward, it is in welcoming "the redemption wrought by Christ Jesus".

Paul, to tell the truth, does not say something entirely new. If he were the author of this unprecedented message, those who say that the true founder of Christianity is Saul of Tarsus, not Jesus of Nazareth, would be right. But they are wrong! Paul does nothing but repeat, adapting it to the situation of the moment, the inaugural announcement of Jesus' preaching: "The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand. Convert and believe in the Gospel" (Mk 1:15). On his lips "repent" did not mean, as in the ancient prophets and in John the Baptist: "Go back, keep the Law and the commandments!"; rather it means: "Leap forward; enter the Kingdom that has come freely among you! Believe the Gospel! To convert is to believe. "The first conversion consists in believing", wrote Saint Thomas Aquinas:

Neither Jesus' discourse nor Paul's discourse stops, of course, at this point. In his preaching, Jesus will explain what welcoming the Kingdom entails and Paul will dedicate the entire second part of his Letter to listing the works, or virtues, which must characterize those who have become new creatures. The kerygma is followed by the parenthesis, the announcement by the exhortation. The important thing is the order to be followed in life and in the proclamation, where to begin, since, as Saint Gregory the Great already said, "one does not arrive at the faith starting from the virtues, but at the virtues starting from the faith" . Every evangelization initiative that wants to start



with reforming the customs of society, before trying to change people's hearts, is doomed to end up in nothing, or worse, in politics.

But there is no need to insist even on that at this moment. We must rather take up the positive teaching of the Apostle. What does the word of God say to a Church which - although wounded in itself and compromised in the eyes of the world - has a leap of hope and wants to resume, with new impetus, her evangelizing mission? He says that it is necessary to start afresh from the person of Christ, to speak of him "in time and out of time"; never give the discourse about him for complete, or supposed. Jesus must not be in the background, but at the heart of every announcement.

The secular world does everything (and unfortunately succeeds!) to keep the name of Jesus at a distance, or silenced, in every discourse on the Church. We must do everything to always keep this in mind. Not to hide behind it, but because it is the strength and life of the Church. At the beginning of *Evangelii gaudium*, we read these words:

I invite every Christian, in whatever place and situation he finds himself, to renew his personal encounter with Jesus Christ today or, at least, to make the decision to allow himself to be encountered by him, to seek him every day non-stop. There is no reason anyone would think this invitation isn't for them.

As far as I know, this is the first time that the expression "personal encounter with Christ" appears in an official document of the Magisterium. Despite its apparent simplicity, this expression contains a novelty that we must try to understand.

In Catholic pastoral care and spirituality, other ways of conceiving our relationship with Christ were familiar in the past. There was talk of a doctrinal relationship, consisting in believing in Christ; of a sacramental relationship that is realized in the sacraments, of an ecclesial relationship, as members of the body of Christ which is the Church; there was also talk of a mystical or spousal relationship reserved for some privileged souls. There was no talk – or at least it was not common to talk – of a personal relationship – like between an I and a you – open to every believer.

During the five centuries we have behind us - which are improperly called "of the Counter-Reformation" - Catholic spirituality and pastoral care have viewed this way of conceiving salvation with suspicion. There was seen the danger (anything but remote and hypothetical after all) of



subjectivism, that is, of conceiving faith and salvation as an individual fact, without a true relationship with Tradition and with the faith of the rest of the Church. The multiplication of currents and denominations in the Protestant world only strengthened this conviction.

Now we have entered, thanks be to God, a new phase in which we strive to see differences, not necessarily as mutually incompatible and therefore to be fought, but, as far as possible, as riches to be shared. In this new climate, the exhortation to have a "personal relationship with Christ" is understood. Indeed, this way of conceiving faith seems to us to be the only one possible since faith is no longer a foregone fact that is absorbed as children with family and school education, but is the fruit of a personal decision. The success of a mission can no longer be measured by the number of confessions heard and communions distributed, but by how many people have gone from being nominal Christians to real Christians, that is, convinced and active in the community.

Let us try to understand what this famous "personal encounter" with Christ actually consists of. I say it's like meeting a person live, after having known him for years only through photography. One can know books about Jesus, doctrines, heresies about Jesus, concepts about Jesus, but not know him alive and present. (I insist above all on these two adjectives: a risen and living Jesus and a present Jesus!). For many, even baptized and believers, Jesus is a character from the past, not a person alive in the present.

It helps to understand the difference what happens in the human environment, when you go from knowing a person to falling in love with them. One can know everything about a woman or a man: what's her name, how old she is, what studies she has done, which family she belongs to... Then one day a spark strikes and she falls in love with that woman or that man. Change everything. You want to be with that person, like them, have them for yourself, afraid of displeasing them and not being worthy of them.

How can we cause that spark towards the person of Jesus to strike in so many? It will not ignite in whoever listens to the Gospel message, if it has not first ignited - at least as a desire, as a search and as a purpose - in whoever proclaims it. There have been and are exceptions; the word of God has its own strength and can act, at times, even if pronounced by those who do not live it; but that's the exception.



For the consolation and encouragement of those who work institutionally in the field of evangelization, I would like to tell them that not everything depends on them. It depends on them to create the conditions for that spark to ignite and spread. But it strikes in the most unexpected ways and moments. In the majority of cases that I have known in my life, the life-changing discovery of Christ was brought about by meeting someone who had already experienced that grace, by participating in a gathering, by hearing a testimony, by having experienced God's presence in a moment of great suffering, and – I cannot keep silent about it, because it happened like this for me too – from having received the so-called baptism of the Spirit.

Here we see the need to rely more and more on lay people, men and women, for evangelization. They are more inserted into the fabric of life in which those circumstances usually occur. Also due to the scarcity of the number, it is easier for us clergy to be pastors than fishers of souls: easier to shepherd those who come to Church with the word and the sacraments than to go out to sea to fish for those who are far away. The laity can make up for us in the task of fishermen. Many of them have discovered what it means to know a living Jesus and are eager to share their discovery with others.

The ecclesial movements, which arose after the Council, were for many the place where they made this discovery. In his homily for the Chrism Mass on Holy Thursday 2012, the last of his pontificate, Benedict XVI stated: "Those who look at the history of the post-conciliar era can recognize the dynamics of true renewal, which has often taken unexpected forms in movements full of life and which makes the inexhaustible liveliness of the Holy Church almost tangible, the presence and effective action of the Holy Spirit". Alongside the good fruit, some of these movements have also produced bad fruit. One should remember the saying: "Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater."

I end with the concluding words of Saint Bonaventure's *Itinerary of the mind to God*, because they suggest where to begin in order to realize, or renew, our "personal relationship with Christ" and become courageous heralds of it: This most secret mystical wisdom -he writes- no one knows it except those who receive it; no one receives it except those who desire it; no one desires it except those who are inflamed within by the Holy Spirit sent by Christ to earth.

1. *Augustine, De natura et gratia, 22,24.*
2. *Thomas Aquinas, S.Th. I-IIae, q.113, a. 4.*
3. *Gregory the Great, Homilies on Ezekiel, II,7 (PL 76, 1018),*
4. *Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, Itinerarium mentis in Deum, VII, 4.*