

**“Evangelization in a Time of Change”  
Saint Agnes Lecture in Pastoral Theology  
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*Introduction*

I am very pleased to be with you here at the Seminary of the Immaculate Conception in the great Diocese of Rockville Centre. In a special way I wish to thank Bishop Murphy and Msgr. Henning for inviting me to give this Saint Agnes Lecture in Pastoral Theology. I also wish to thank the Board of Governors, Faculty, and Staff for their important work in the continuing formation of ministers of the Church. Certainly this venerable institution is responsible for nurturing and guiding for many years those who aspired to the priesthood. I am heartened also to learn of the many collaborative efforts among dioceses that help this institution fulfill its mission for those who have leadership roles in the Church.

As the Apostolic Nuncio, the Holy Father’s personal representative in this country, I wish to assure you of his spiritual closeness and affection for each of you.

We know that the recent Popes have spoken of the notion of Evangelization and the New Evangelization. This requires a profound reconsideration of how we can communicate the Christian experience. This is the core of the new missionary spirit that must take hold of the Church. Central to this theme of Evangelization is a lived faith that must be learned and deepened constantly. The need for this missionary spirit is becoming more urgent as challenges in transmitting the faith are increasing, especially in those regions in which the Faith was once strong.

My concern is that in the midst of globalization, emerging technologies, and disconnectedness, a feeling of meaninglessness is growing in the lives of the men and women of our day. People of these times are not always looking to the Church or to the Faith for the answers to life’s deepest questions. This is what I would like to speak to you about today.

What the Bishops of Latin America recognized some years ago is just as pertinent for the Church in the United States now:

Our cultural traditions are no longer handed on from one generation to the next with the same ease as in the past. This even affects that deepest core of each culture, constituted by religious experience, which is now likewise difficult to hand on through education and the beauty of cultural expressions. It even reaches into the family itself, which, as a place of dialogue and intergenerational solidarity, had been one of the most important vehicles for handing on the faith.<sup>1</sup>

As I continue, I hope to address this phenomenon and what it means for the challenging mission of Evangelization.

*1. Religion a la carte?*

Since my arrival in the United States, I have noticed how many different options you have to shop, to eat, to dress, to vacation, to the point of choosing alternative lifestyles or even changing one’s gender. There are so many possibilities and alternatives. The principle of selection through options and choices seems to dominate our culture. This mentality of having many choices appears to have affected how people approach faith. The transmission of the faith encounters difficulties today due to this new mindset that sees different religious alternatives as if they were part of the options offered to us. Just as Pope Benedict XVI spoke of a “dictatorship of relativism”<sup>2</sup>, there is an emerging relativism in religious experience. Then-Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, SJ, now Pope Francis, in his book-length interview *El Jesuita* speaks to this:

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<sup>1</sup> V Conferencia General del Episcopado Latinoamericano y del Caribe, *Documento conclusivo*, CELAM, Aparecida 2007, n. 37.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Homily at Mass “Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice”*, 18 April 2005.

Some choose a Mass based on how the priest preaches. But after two months, they say that the choir isn't working well and then they turn to change again. There is a reduction of the religious to the aesthetic. It is like a changing of the ship in the religious supermarket. It is as if religion is a product to be consumed, very much linked, to my tastes, and to a certain type of diffuse theism carried forward within the parameters of the New Age, where it is mixed a lot with personal satisfaction, relaxation, and well-being.<sup>3</sup>

What does all of this really mean? How are we to interpret this? The Holy Father continues:

I would say that the gravely serious thing that all this is expressing is a lack of a personal encounter with God, of an authentic religious experience. This is what I believe creates in the end the "religion *a la carte*." I believe that one has to recover the religious act as a movement towards an encounter with Jesus Christ.<sup>4</sup>

Today in addressing the problem, sometimes people propose superficial solutions that can be somewhat attractive to meet the demands of a superficial culture, as if they were trying a new marketing strategy. This is part of our advertising world - to see if something works. However, many activities that take place in our churches – presentations, programming, meetings, social gatherings – are cosmetic and do not produce real change, if any change at all. If something doesn't work, people simply move on. Western civilization seems to be taken with the 'given-moment' while losing its sense of permanence. It is symptomatic of what Pope Francis has called the 'throwaway culture' – to dispose of anything that doesn't work or persons who are not productive.

Today, people are asking profound questions about meaning in their lives, but some eventually discover that the superficial ideas do not satisfy the longings of the human heart. Perhaps, our restless generation might learn from St. Augustine, whose restless heart finally came to understand that "*Our hearts are restless, O Lord, until they rest in You.*"

It is the logic of the Incarnation that always requires that we accept all that is human, except sin, to propose again, with new missionary vigor, the newness that the Person of Jesus Christ represents. Our methods of Evangelization require a profound reconsideration to see whether we are effectively communicating the authentic Christian experience. Are we actually communicating a lived faith and the content of faith that, with effort, can subsequently be learned and deepened by reason – with closeness, simplicity, warmth and transparency?

## 2. *A Gospel that is Reduced to Culture*

I suspect that if we answered this question honestly, we would discover that we have transmitted the faith as a type of moralism – a faith based on rules and regulations, focused on right and wrong, or as merely social or cultural baggage. Sadly even the sacramental life is often reduced to going through the motions – whether with Baptism, Confirmation, First Communion and even Matrimony – and then having a big reception afterward. Missing is the clear focus on the person of Jesus Christ. This is the sobering reality of life in the Church which many experience.

The relationship between faith and culture is very close. St. John Paul II said: "The synthesis between culture and faith is not just a demand of culture, but also of faith. ... A faith which does not become culture is a faith which has not been fully received, not thoroughly thought through, not faithfully lived out."<sup>5</sup>

If the faith does not show itself joyfully and purposefully in the culture of our societies, the novelty of Christianity does not happen as a proposal of an integral reception of all that is authentically human.

However, sometimes, the culture that has arisen from the faith subsists in some manner without the experience of a living faith which is at its origin, as I said before. What do I mean? – At times the faith in the Church, in communities, and in families is transmitted as cultural baggage, as moral education, as a set of values, but is really without Christ. A faith without Christ, reduced to mere values, loses its attractiveness and its relevancy.

<sup>3</sup> S. Rubin-F. Ambrogetti, *El Jesuita*, Bs. As., 2010, 80-81.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> John Paul II, *Address for the Creation of the Pontifical Council for Culture*, 20 May 1982, 2.

Just ask your pastors how many confirmed young people continue to practice their faith. How many children who make their First Communion are at Mass the following Sunday? How many couples who marry at a Nuptial Mass are attending Mass regularly? Our Christian culture unfortunately is taken up with a 'for the moment' experience but the encounter with Jesus Christ is not merely a 'for the moment' experience. God's covenants with His people are forever. At Mass, in consecrating the species, we speak of the "new and eternal covenant," not something that is just for the moment. God's intention is to enter into a permanent relationship with each one of us.

We need to re-examine how we are transmitting the faith. It is not enough that we try to share Christianity, if we have reduced it to a mere cultural, ritual, folk or social tradition. In this respect, it is worth recalling that one of the most striking and consistent things in the teaching of Benedict XVI was the critique of moralism, that is, of the ideological reduction of Christianity to ethical values. Just before he was elected Pope, he noted:

The temptation to transform Christianity into moralism and to concentrate everything in the moral action of man is great in all times. ... I believe that the temptation to reduce Christianity to moralism is very great even in our times. ... In other words, Augustine teaches that holiness and Christian rectitude do not consist in any superhuman greatness or superior talent. If it were so, Christianity would be converted into a religion for some heroes or for groups of the select few.<sup>6</sup>

As Pope, Benedict placed this same conviction at the beginning of his first encyclical *Deus Caritas est*.

Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.<sup>7</sup>

In continuity, Pope Francis explores in depth this same idea. In his interview with Father Antonio Spadaro, SJ, he said that we must precisely avoid saturating people with moral teachings – even the most correct ones – without having first announced the tenderness and compassion with which the Risen Jesus Christ approaches, embraces, and conquers the sin of the sinner.<sup>8</sup>

Permit me to say it in a succinct way: the kerygma is not Christian morality. The kerygma – the proclamation of the Good News- is not a 'traditional' custom or a certain 'social practice.' The kerygma is the joyful announcement that Jesus Christ is a living Person to be encountered, who through his Resurrection has defeated my sin and my death.

When Christianity is reduced to custom, to moral norms, to social rituals, it loses, sooner rather than later, its vitality and its existential interest for the men and women of our day. In saying this, it is very easy that someone could think that Christian morality could be considered to be something irrelevant or dispensable. It is not so.

Christian morality, Christian culture and Christian values are part of the action by which we show forth 'the newness' of Christian life, which flows from our encounter with Jesus Christ. In other words, what is often lacking in the process of Evangelization is 'beginning again from Jesus Christ.' To begin again from the experience of mercy that is offered to us, although we have sinned, is to reform our life with the help of grace so that our freedom, rather than alienating us, helps us to conform that life to the plan of God.

When Christian morality asserts itself without Jesus Christ, even though the theological and philosophical conclusions might be correct, it does not penetrate the heart in a way that leads to conversion. The One who saves, heals, and transforms is Jesus Christ Himself. Christian morality, which is often missing in our communities, can be practiced only through the strength of Him who shares His strength with us by means of grace. This is what helps us persevere in virtue and which also give us the patience and kindness necessary to announce the Gospel in a way that touches the heart of the person and does not alienate them from the faith.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, "Presentación del libro *El Poder y la Gracia. Actualidad de san Agustín*", en *30 Giorni*, n. 5, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas est*, 25 December 2005, 1.

<sup>8</sup> Francis, "Busquemos ser una Iglesia que encuentra caminos nuevos," Entrevista realizada por Antonio Spadaro, para la *Civiltà Cattolica*, September 2013.

A Christianity that confuses itself with a mere cultural tradition or which cannot distinguish itself from other proposals that are also based on certain values is not convincing to new generations. Jesus Christ is a Person, not a concept. He is the one who can “make all things new.” (Rev 21, 5)

Pope Francis tells us: “Our Lord Jesus Christ bursts forth into our history, marked by its vulnerability, with an incomparable dynamism, full of strength and courage. That is the kerygma, the nucleus of our preaching: the proclamation about the bursting forth into our history of Jesus Christ, in His Incarnation, Death, and Resurrection.”<sup>9</sup>

As disciples and missionaries, we want to confront this challenge that goes to the root of the problem: Are we willing to personally encounter the Person of Jesus Christ in our lives and live out the moments of that encounter every day? Are we willing to propose the Person of Jesus Christ to others as “the One who makes all things new”?

The salvific message is essentially not going to come from new programs, more meetings, social gatherings, or even from abstract theology. Ask yourselves whether any of those things I just mentioned sound like: “*The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me. He has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the afflicted; he has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted; to proclaim liberty to the captives; and the opening of the prison to those who are bound....*” (Is 61:1)?

We could think of the witness of Saint Francis of Assisi, who remains attractive to the men and women of our day. How was he able to rebuild the Church as he was commanded through his personal encounter with Christ on the Cross? Seemingly he began with nothing. In reality, he began again and again and again – with Jesus Christ.

True Evangelization occurs by being faithful to the Event that is Jesus Christ. The Pope offers us today with his words and actions a magnificent example of how to re-propose the Gospel, how to transmit it to new generations without fear and without paralysis.

### 3. *Epochal Change and the Encounter with Christ*

I believe that what the Holy Father is attempting through this Jubilee of Mercy is to demonstrate to people that God has not forgotten them and that they too belong to Christ and His Church. Excessive moralism has not brought about a true conversion of heart. More programming has not given people a sense that they truly belong to the Church. The failure of efforts to evangelize can, in part, be attributed to a lack of attentiveness to the signs of the times, in particular, to a lack of awareness of the epochal change which we are witnessing.

Recently, Pope Francis said, “Today we are not living in an epoch of change so much as an epochal change.”<sup>10</sup> What does he mean? I spent the last nine years as Apostolic Nuncio in Mexico. The bishops of Latin America had to confront this very question as they saw Catholics fall away from the Church or join sects. They noticed that in history, there were certain principles or values which helped organize the life of persons, societies, and institutions. These were different for each era – the pre-Columbian period, the colonial period, the period of independence, and the modern period. At some point, some of the ‘unquestioned’ values of each epoch began to be challenged and replaced by other values. The modern period, for them, seemed to be marked by globalization and an increasing fragmentation in society, which made Evangelization difficult.

You also could begin to look at the various epochs in American history and begin to notice a distinct change in values. Perhaps, 1968 would serve as a watershed moment in this country. The modern period in this country seems to be affected by globalization, emerging new technologies, especially in the area of communications, great movement or displacement of persons, and a loss of a Christian anthropology.

All of this results in a lack of identification with the Church and a sense of belonging. This is what alienates people today, who suffer from a terrible loneliness or sense of insecurity. Noted sociologist Zygmunt Bauman recently wrote:

<sup>9</sup> Jorge Bergoglio, *El verdadero poder es el servicio*, Editorial Claretiana, Bs. As. 2007, 197.

<sup>10</sup> Pope Francis, “Address at the Meeting with participants in the Fifth Convention of the Italian Church,” Firenze, 10 November 2015.

“The roots of insecurity are very deep. They are embedded in our way of living; they are marked by the weakness of bonds... by the crumbling of community, by the substitution of human solidarity with competition. The fear generated by this situation of insecurity ... is diffused throughout all the aspects of our life.”<sup>11</sup>

Msgr. Luigi Giussani, the founder of Communion and Liberation, noted that the modern person is characterized by “doubt about existence, the fear of existence, the fragility of life, the inconsistency of himself, the terror of the impossibility; the horror of disproportion between himself and the ideal.”<sup>12</sup>

In this particular context, we who need to announce the Gospel cannot do this by neglecting the new methods and expressions that the new generations demand of us. In other words, a main reason, it seems to me, that the difficulty in the intergenerational transmission of the faith exists is specifically rooted in the difficulty that we encounter in attentively ‘reading’ the epochal change in which we are living.

In the face of this existential fear, one approach would simply be to build a wall around ourselves, but this would never rid people of their loneliness or interior fear. This would not actually help them to live in a new way or to experience the joy that comes with freedom. The alternative to building walls is dialogue.

Cardinal Tauran describes what this dialogue might look like: “The response is always and in any case a dialogue, an encounter ... the only possible road is that of an unarmed dialogue. Substantially, in my opinion, to dialogue means to go toward another unarmed, with a conception of truth that is not aggressive, and yet not disoriented.”<sup>13</sup>

At the heart of dialogue is the communication of one’s own personal life to others. It is a sharing of the existence of others in one’s existence. It is not always about proving oneself to be right. It is about a mutual sharing of persons that deals with how to live. As Christians, our dialogue should express the lived-Christian experience, not as a type of moralism, but as a grace which we have received from our initial encounter with Christ.

We cannot force anyone to believe, especially not young people. Rather, we can offer them the opportunity to share in the grace that we have received and invite them once more to belong to Christ and the Church. We do so by communicating this grace through the witness of our life. Evangelization, therefore, is not primarily about words but about the Word, the Word of Life.

However, we do not evangelize in a vacuum. It is necessary to understand the epochal change in which we are living, because it is in that context that we will give expression to our witness. Pope Francis appears to be giving us an example of how to witness to the faith in this epoch of change by going to the peripheries and by calling us to do the same.

This should not be surprising to us, because this was the method of Jesus who proclaimed the Good News of the Kingdom to the leper, the sinner, the tax collector, and the foreigner. In encountering the marginalized, He effectively broke down barriers by His Mercy and gave them a sense of belonging. When we go out to the periphery, to the farthest bounds, we are in reality discovering the One who transcends all time and space. For example, Mother Teresa of Calcutta encountered and touched Christ in the poorest of the poor – those who lived with anxiety, without family bonds, who suffered from terrible loneliness.

As disciples and missionaries, we want to confront the challenges to evangelization – the multiplicity of religious choices in a post-modern age; the reduction of the Christian message to moralism or to mere social tradition; and, the epochal change in which we live. We should not despair, knowing that Jesus Christ accompanies us always and invites us to collaborate with Him in proclaiming the Good News for the salvation of mankind.

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<sup>11</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, “Alle radici dell’insicurezza,” intervista a cura di D. Casati, *Corriere della Sera*, 26 July 2016, p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> Luigi Giussani, “Corresponsibilità,” *Litterae Communis-CL*, n. 11, 1991.

<sup>13</sup> Jean-Louis Tauran, “Un altro passo verso l’abisso...”, intervista a cura di Paolo Rodari, *La Repubblica*, 27 July 2016, p. 8.