

# IS ANOTHER CHURCH POSSIBLE? SOME URGENT TASKS FOR CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

José Antonio Pagola

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I am going to talk about something which has been in my heart over these last years. Can Christians find within themselves today the spiritual strength necessary to trigger off a process of conversion to Jesus Christ? Is it possible to mobilize the forces of the Church towards a more faithful following of Jesus? Is it possible to initiate this reaction in the current situation of crisis and widespread disenchantment? Will Pope Francis open a new horizon? What can we do in the parishes and Christian Communities?

Naturally, I do not intend to cover all aspects and dimensions of a possible renewal of the Church at all levels in the coming decades. My purpose here is more modest. I just want to enkindle in our communities some of that fire Jesus wanted to see burning in the world (Luke 12:49). Shaking our consciences to take more seriously what his Spirit is trying to tell us, his followers, today. Is another Church possible? What can we do in our parishes, communities and Christian groups?

## 1. Returning to Jesus, the Christ

The shift needed by Christianity today, the decisive self-correction, is simply to return to Jesus Christ so as to focus the Church more truly and faithfully on his person and his project of the Reign of God. This radical conversion to Jesus Christ is the most important thing that can happen in the Church in the coming years. Undoubtedly many things will need to be done, in all fields and at all levels, but there is nothing more important than to encourage this conversion. Very recently Pope Francis has spoken of the need to overcome the temptation of “being Christians without Jesus” and has indicated that “only what leads to Jesus is valid and only that which is valid comes from Jesus. Jesus is the centre, he is the Lord”.<sup>1</sup>

### Conversion to Jesus Christ

When we talk about "returning to Christ," we are not talking about an "aggiornamento," adapting to the present times; something which is, moreover, absolutely necessary if the Church is to fulfill its mission in our pluralistic and secular society. We are talking about returning to him who is the source and origin of the Church: The one who justifies the presence of the Church in the world and

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<sup>1</sup> Homily in Saint Martha, September 7, 2013

in history. We're talking about letting God, the one incarnate in Jesus, be the only God of the Church, the Abba, the God friend of life, the Father defender of the poor. Only if we start from this conversion will a real "aggiornamento" be possible.

This conversion is not an effort we ask only of the hierarchy, something required of religious men and women, of theologians, or of a particular sector of the Church. It is a conversion to which all of us in the Church of Jesus are called. A "sustained" conversion over the coming years, that has to be initiated by the present generations and to be transmitted as a spirit and an attitude to future generations.

This conversion is not just about a religious reformation, it is a conversion to the Spirit of Jesus. When Christianity, as lived by many, is not centered on the following of Jesus; when his project of the Kingdom of God is not the primary task of many diocesan churches and parishes; when active compassion and solidarity is not the main principle of activity; when the last are not the first in our Christian communities ... what we need is not just a religious reformation, but a conversion to the Spirit that inspired the whole life of Jesus. After twenty centuries of Christianity, the heart of the Church needs conversion and purification. In these times of unprecedented sociocultural changes, the Church needs a conversion without precedent, a "new heart" that will generate faith in Jesus Christ in a new way in our modern society. If, in the years ahead, a climate of humble, joyful and real conversion to the Spirit of Jesus is not promoted, it will be easily seen how our multiseular Christianity degenerates more and more into decadent and sectarian religious forms, increasingly distant from that movement inspired and loved by Jesus.

Conversion to Jesus Christ is much more than introducing some changes in the liturgical celebrations or in pastoral activities. It is too late. The conversion that the Church needs today will not come from liturgical reforms introduced by specialists, nor innovations in pastoral strategy. Conversion at a deeper level is necessary to make this possible. We need to go back to the roots, to what's essential, to that which Jesus lived and passed on to others. We need to live again today in some way the "founding experience" as it was lived at the beginning. To root the Church in Jesus Christ, as the only truth on which to base our lives, it is not enough to put things in order, to make calls to communion, or to introduce new changes in the way the Church has always functioned. Conversion to Jesus Christ is calling us to mobilize ourselves to create in our parishes and Christian communities a new and a different atmosphere, one of a humble but tireless quest, to revive and live again the essence of the Gospel today as something ever new.

## **New relationship with Jesus**

The conversion that is asked of us really implies a new quality in our relationship with Jesus. A Church made up of Christian communities that relate to a badly known Jesus, who is vaguely grasped, abstractly confessed, a silent Jesus who says nothing special to today's world, a dull Jesus with no appeal, who neither calls nor touches hearts... this is a Church that runs the risk of burning out and extinguishing in the years ahead.

We need Christian communities marked by a new experience of Jesus. Communities impelled by Christians who are aware of being drawn by Jesus and for his project. Christians who belong to Jesus and, because of this belonging, contribute to make the Church more faithful to him. Christians who at all levels present Jesus as the best, the most valuable, the most attractive and the most loved: Jesus our only Master and Lord.

We have to recover and care for our unrenounceable identity as followers of Jesus, to find in Jesus the deepest identity of our parishes and Christian communities. Concretely that would mean, to advance, over the coming years, to a new level of Christian life, moving into a new phase of Christianity, more inspired and motivated by Jesus, and more structured to serve the project of the Kingdom of God. To my mind, this is the horizon and the perspective from which Christian communities need to work today.

What is crucial is not resigning ourselves to live Christianity without conversion. At this time we are all called to cooperate in this difficult but engaging task, that of moving on to a new phase, one more faithful to Jesus in the history of the Church. No matter our age, place and responsibility within the Christian community... everyone can contribute so that Jesus be felt and lived in a new way within the Church. We can make the Church belong to Jesus more, appear more like him.

If we ignore Jesus, our communities will live ignoring themselves: we won't be able to know our most essential and critical work and mission. Unless we look at life, the people and the world with the same compassion with which Jesus looked, the Church will be a blind Church, we will deceive ourselves believing to see everything through the privileged light of Revelation, but we will be living as if closed to the only one who is the "true light that enlightens every man and woman coming into the world".<sup>2</sup> If we do not listen to the voice of the Father and do not attend to the suffering of the people, our communities will be deaf communities, not aware of the Gospel and unable to communicate the Good News of God embodied and revealed in Jesus.

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2 John: 1,9

We must dare to discern what is true and what is false in our celebrations, our pastoral strategies, our projects and our interests. Not to be afraid of naming our Gospel deviations. It is not about blaming one another, sometimes just to justify our own mediocrity. It is wrong to think that the Church will be converted to Jesus just by criticizing ourselves and running ourselves down. What we need is to build up positively. We need to bear the present sin of the Church as the sin of all, a sin of which we are all more or less accomplices, especially through our failure, passivity, silence or mediocrity. Not everyone has the same responsibility for the sin of the Church, but we are all called to live in a conversion process.

## **2. Liberating the strength of the Gospel**

Can Christians find today within themselves the spiritual strength necessary to trigger off a process of conversion to Jesus Christ? Is it possible to mobilize the forces of the Church towards a more faithful following of Jesus? Is it possible to initiate this reaction in the current situation of crisis and widespread disenchantment? Will Pope Francis open a new horizon? What can we do in parishes and Christian Communities?

### **Direct and immediate contact with the Gospel**

The most serious and obvious symptom of the crisis in the Christian communities is the relentless moving away of the people. The various factors that are at the root of this can be analyzed. One thing is clear: the Church has lost its attractiveness. This factor forces us to ask a key question: Shall we continue operating as we always did, trying to respond as best as possible to the religious needs, in the way of acting of a Church that is gradually losing its appeal and credibility, or shall we retrieve as soon as possible the Gospel of Jesus, as the decisive force, if not the only one, capable of engendering the faith in the men and women of today? <sup>3</sup>

Those who come today to a Christian community do not directly meet the Gospel of Jesus. What they perceive is the functioning of a multi-secular religion with clear signs of crisis and aging. The Gospel stays hidden behind a set of practices, customs, languages, devotions and religious formulas that many find difficult to understand and accept. It is not easy to clearly identify within that religion the attractiveness and power of the Gospel as the Good News coming from the impact caused by Jesus in human history.

No doubt his Gospel today is also found within that religion, giving meaning and encouragement to the worship and the behavior of Christians. However, as it is

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3 Paul Tihon, *Pour libérer l'Évangile*. Paris, Ed. du Cerf, 2009.

experienced by many practicing Christians, that religion does not give rise to "disciples" who are learning to base their lives on the Gospel of Jesus, but adherents to a religion; it does not generate "followers" of Jesus who, identified with his project, strive to open up ways to the Kingdom of God, rather does it generate members of a religious institution that comply more or less with what has been established.

For several reasons, which we cannot discuss here, pastoral work is carried out in such a way that it nearly always ends up structuring the faith of Christians, not as coming from the experience of a personal encounter with Jesus the Christ, but from the doctrinal, moral and sacramental initiation into a religion. However, as Benedict XVI used to say, "one does not begin to be a Christian out of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but from an encounter with an event, a person, who gives our life a new horizon and thereby a decisive orientation".<sup>4</sup>

It is not difficult to see that many good Christians only know the Gospel "second hand". All they know of Jesus and his message comes from what can be reconstructed in a partial and fragmentary way, from what they have heard from preachers and catechists. They live their religious experience deprived of a direct and immediate contact with the "words of Jesus" that were "spirit and life"<sup>5</sup> for the early Christians. That is the basic point. Trapped inside a religion in crisis, the energy of the Gospel stays blocked, without ways or spaces to enter into vital contact with today's men and women. The Gospel of Jesus cannot manifest all its saving power when it is presented from a cultural and religious tradition that is losing attractiveness.

Isn't it time to place the Gospel firmly in the centre of Christian communities? The Second Vatican Council has reminded us that, over the centuries, it is the Gospel that gives life to the Church in every age: "The Gospel is, at all times, the basis of the life of the Church".<sup>6</sup>

We have to reclaim the central role that the Gospel had in the beginning and in the growth of the early Christian communities. We have to envisage and form the Christian community to become a place whose priority is to accept the Gospel of Jesus. Making it a place where embracing the Gospel gets more attention than anything else. We need to re-found the parishes on the direct and immediate experience of the Gospel. Regenerate the parish fabric that is in crisis drawing from the transforming power of the Gospel.

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4 Benedictus XVI, *Deus Caritas est*, n.1

5 John: 6,63

6 *Lumen Gentium*, 20

This requires establishing a new space to hear the Gospel together. Believers, less believers, those of little faith and even non-believers meeting together in small groups around the Gospel, giving the Gospel the opportunity to come into direct and immediate contact with the men and women of our time. Let the strength of the Gospel penetrate their lives with their problems, crisis, fears and hopes. We need to awaken in the ordinary people a desire for the Gospel; let them really become familiar with it, let them enjoy it and claim it from the hierarchy. Today, almost everything is decided in the Church without the People God and apart from them, but if the people recuperate the Gospel, they will draw the hierarchy after them. As Michel Legaut used to say, "It is the Christian people who will save Christianity and not their leaders who, after all, cannot but follow them".<sup>7</sup>

### **The Gospel as a beginning of a new Christian identity**

The story of Jesus, read, heard and shared in groups, is the most natural way for refreshing today, in some way, the original experience of the first disciples who met him on the roads of Galilee. In the four short texts that reflect this account we find the memory of Jesus, as he was remembered, believed and loved by his early followers: the impact made by Jesus on the first ones who were drawn to him and responded to his call.

The Gospels are not academic textbooks presenting doctrine about Jesus. They are not catechisms. The first thing you learn from them is a way of life: the way of life of Jesus, his way of being in the world, how he interpreted and constructed history,<sup>8</sup> his way of making life more human. The most original feature of these groups, as they meet together to share the Gospel of Jesus, is that of offering a new experience: being born to faith, not by way of "indoctrination" or a "learning process", but as an experience of transformation through contact with Jesus. What you hear in these groups is not an instruction from a catechist or a teaching from a preacher, but the Word of God incarnate in Jesus.

As a result of this experience lived around the Gospel it is possible to introduce into the parish community a dynamic that leads to understanding and living the faith, not as a doctrinal adherence formulated in categories or concepts of the past, but primarily as a way of life attainable in all cultures and at all times. It is not about underestimating the doctrinal content that Christianity has developed, over twenty centuries, within western culture, but about integrating and especially about living from a more basic and overall perception of the Christian

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7 Marcel Legaut, *Creer en la Iglesia del futuro*. Santander, Sal Terrae, 1985, p.122

8 Christof Theobald. *Le christianisme comme style. Une manière de faire la théologie en postmodernité*. Paris, Ed. du Cerf, 2008, I, 16-177.

faith as a following of Jesus. We acknowledge and adore Jesus as Christ and Lord by following his steps and not just by repeating his formulas.

We need to learn to read the Gospels almost as "conversion stories" that have been written to give rise to disciples and followers. They are stories that invite the listeners to enter into a process of change, transformation of identity, following of Jesus, identification with his cause, collaboration with his project of the Kingdom of God. It is in this attitude of conversion that they are to be read, meditated, shared, welcomed and passed on in the Christian community.

As understood in this way, listening to the Gospel story in these small Church groups is not to be considered just as one activity among others, but as the matrix from which faith can be regenerated in our parishes and communities. The Gospel has a regenerative force that is unimaginable. It teaches how to live the faith, not by compulsion but by attraction, it makes for living the Christian life, not as a practice of a religion, but as a passionate following of Jesus and collaboration with his humanizing project of the Kingdom of God. I am convinced that the real secret of the so called "new evangelization" is simply to come into a more vital, immediate and direct contact with the person of Jesus and his Gospel. This experience can inaugurate in a humble but real way a new phase in the history of our communities.

### **3. Retrieving the humanizing project of the Kingdom of God**

Forgetting the memory of Jesus within the Church, as well as various historical factors, have led to serious consequences. Undoubtedly the most serious one is the widespread oblivion of the Kingdom project, Jesus' true passion and, above all, the dissolution and darkening of his historical dimension.

#### **The Kingdom of God as the goal and raison d'être of the Christian community**

To a large extent the Church has put aside the Kingdom of God. This Kingdom that was for Jesus the purpose and the reason of his life, the core of his message and the passion that inspired his devotion to the Father's will unto death, is no longer the driving force, the motor, the raison d'être for Christians today. However the temptation of worrying about its followers, its institutions, its future, its interests, is always alive in the Church.

It has been said that "ecclesiocentrism is one of the Christian heresies that, with the greatest unconsciousness and impunity, has been introduced into the

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Christof Theobald, *Lire les Ecritures dans un contexte de mutation eclesial*, en Jean François Bouthors (Ed.) *La Bible sans avoir peur*. Paris, Lethielleux, 2005, 263-291

history of the faith, both in its most blatant and subtle forms, both in the past and in the present".<sup>9</sup> The constant preaching of the Gospel every Sunday to the Christian communities, or the writings of the hierarchy to the diocesan churches, fail to make clear that the first task of the Church and of Christian communities is that humanizing project of the Father, which Jesus called metaphorically "Kingdom of God". While living deprived of that clear primary project, we live organizing over the years Jubilees, Centenaries, the Year of Faith, the Marian Year, the Year of the Ministerial Priesthood... all of which nearly always disperse and distract us from what is essential.

Jesus used to invite his followers not simply to seek the Kingdom of God but "the Kingdom of God and his justice"; we usually encourage the search for God without speaking of his justice. Jesus did not just call them to conversion to God; he asked them to "enter" into the dynamics of the Kingdom of God, collaborating in opening the way to a more humane, dignified and just world. We propose conversion without a clear view in the horizon of the project of the Kingdom. We initiate others in prayer, but often undervalue or ignore the real content of the Our Father, the only prayer Jesus bequeathed to us to feed our identity as his disciples and collaborators in the project of the Kingdom of the Father.

Undoubtedly, the Church contributes to building up of the Kingdom of God, working in many ways towards the humanization of the world, but it is necessary to recover the centrality of God's Kingdom. When the absolute primacy of the Kingdom is forgotten in the Christian communities, the Jesus movement is distorted and the energies of the communities are dispersed in a thousand tasks, practices and devotions that sometimes lag far behind his project. What can we do?

In the first place let's not identify the Kingdom of God with the Church. We must be grateful to Paul VI and John Paul II for their clear and unequivocal position as they recalled the mind of the Second Vatican Council. The former reads: "Only the Kingdom of God is absolute. Everything else is relative".<sup>10</sup> Later, John Paul II stated the nature of the Church in these terms: "The Church itself is not its own end, as it is orientated towards the Kingdom of God of which it is seed, sign and instrument"<sup>11</sup>. Pope Francis has criticized on many occasions the "self-referentiality of the Church", its being self-enclosed. If we work towards more lucid, more co-responsible and evangelical communities, we do not do this thinking of the interests of the Church but because we want and we seek a more just and caring world, a more humane and just society.

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9 Pedro Casaldàliga-José María Vigil, *Espiritualidad de la liberación*. San Salvador. UCA Editores, 1992, p.134

10 Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n.8

11 John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, n.18



Secondly, we need to refound and form communities in a new way, not in order to respond to the needs of a religion, but to contribute to the project of the Kingdom. The decisive turning is about passing from communities which primarily focused on worship and catechesis to open communities dedicated to opening ways to the Kingdom of God in the midst of the problems, struggles and sufferings of today's world. As Pope Francis would say, communities who, moved by the Spirit of Jesus, go out "to the peripheries of existence".

Over the centuries the Jesus movement has been set up as a religion, with its own worship, beliefs, obligations and practices. This fact is legitimate and even necessary. But the time has come to remember that Christianity is not a religion founded by Jesus to respond exclusively to the religious needs of the human being, but a prophetic religion, born of the prophetic spirit of Jesus to build a more just and united world on this earth, aiming toward its ultimate salvation in the Father.

We must be clear that evangelizing is not about developing a religion but announcing and opening paths to the kingdom. This is invariably the command of Jesus: "Go and announce the Kingdom of God." "Go and heal life." The Kingdom of God is not a religious construction. It is not built on religious practices. One does not enter into its dynamic through adjusting to a religious discipline, but by closely following its healing and liberating practices. So to make Christianity a religion at the service of this Kingdom of God in our communities it is necessary to recover its historical and social dimension.

### **Retrieving the historic and social dimension of the Kingdom of God**

In a simple way we can say that, for Jesus, the "Kingdom of God" is life as the Father wants it to be. But that Kingdom embraces all the richness of what God's work is. However over the centuries, the darkening of the memory of Jesus and of his Gospel has brought about the impoverishment of his exciting project, forgetting basic dimensions and introducing regrettable reductions.

And so the Kingdom of God has gradually become the "Kingdom of heaven", following without justification the language of Matthew and reducing all God's humanizing project to its transcendent realization in the Father's mansion. However, Jesus does not make "heaven" the centre of his life and message. When we pray the 'Our Father', we do not ask to go to heaven, but "Thy Kingdom come" and "the will of the Father be done on earth." It is significant that Jesus proclaims eternal salvation by restoring health to the sick and suffering of this world.

At other times and following a possible reading of Luke 11:21, the Kingdom of God is reduced to an intimate and individualistic reality that occurs within the person open to grace ("The Kingdom of God is within you"). It is true that we open ourselves to God's Kingdom from an inner attitude of conversion to the God

revealed in Jesus, but it is also true that this project gradually grows into a social reality in places where sociopolitical life is becoming more just and fraternal (“The Kingdom of God is among you”). On other occasions, misusing a statement from Origenes (autobasileia), the Kingdom of God is identified with the person of Jesus and everything is reduced to an imitation of him, from a very individualistic piety which is fed by the reception of the sacraments. However, while it is true that Jesus presents himself as the messenger of God to proclaim and advance the Kingdom of God it is evident that when he speaks of this Kingdom he is referring to a reality other than himself. What remains of the project of the Kingdom of God in a community contaminated by such mindsets and experiences? How should we react?

Firstly: we must learn to welcome the Kingdom of God in life. In a generalized manner, Christians spontaneously associate God with religion: their behavior in life is only a moral obligation which stems from their religious practice. Jesus places himself before God in another way. While the teachers of the Law and the Temple leaders associate God with their religious system, Jesus links God to life. On the one hand, they feel called by God to secure the temple worship, the ritual sacrifices, the observance of the Law or the fulfillment of the Sabbath, on the other, Jesus feels impelled by the Spirit of God to promote a more liberated way of life. For him, the first thing is the life of the people and not the Temple worship; healing the sick and not the Sabbath; social reconciliation and not the offerings each one brings to the altar; the friendly welcoming of sinners and excluded people and not the rites of expiation or cleanliness norms; the defense of the least and not the defense of the precepts...

We must recover in the Christian communities the call to open ways to the Kingdom of God in life, bearing in mind in all pastoral activities the programmatic text which defines the whole performance of Jesus according to Luke<sup>12</sup>. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me. He has sent me to proclaim the Good News to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and sight to the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year acceptable to the Lord". This is not just one more text. These groups of people, the "poor", the "captive", the "oppressed" symbolize and summarize the principal concern of Jesus, those he carries most in his prophetic heart. These are the ones that must occupy the core of the concerns of a community of Jesus. And this program of Jesus must be ours. The message to be promoted and radiated from the Christian community is to be "good news for the poor", "liberation" for the oppressed, "light" for those who walk in darkness and without hope, "freedom", grace, solidarity, defense for the most defenseless and vulnerable.

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<sup>12</sup> Luke: 4, 16-22 (Cf. Isaiah: 62, 1-2)

Secondly: The call to collaborate with the project of the Kingdom of God requires introducing a conversion in the religious practice promoted in the Christian communities. We cannot allow the sacramental signs to replace or displace the liberating signs of the Kingdom that Jesus practiced in life: signs of compassion, justice, denunciation, healing, compassionate closeness... The decisive change is to extend the horizon of our communities. Taking steps towards communities that are able to "become aware of reality" tuning into the drama of hunger, misery, wars in the world, and are able to bear the suffering that surrounds them. JB Metz is right when he denounces that in the Christian religion there are too many songs and too few cries of indignation, too much complacency and too little nostalgia for a more human world, too much consolation and too little hunger for justice. What kind of Christian communities are these "shielded" in their religious practice against all forms of disturbing suffering?

We need to react, to develop, patiently, a style of practice in the service of the Kingdom of God which is different from the style of a religious practitioner. We must insert the dynamics of the Kingdom in the Christian communities by recovering the gestures, the reactions, the language and the attitudes of Jesus. We need to give our full adherence to his lifestyle: faith in God's plan, confidence in his humanizing action, active and caring compassion, austerity of life, anger, liberating activity, unconditional acceptance of everyone, preferential attention to the most needy. We need to promote more humane spaces and activities, campaigns and community commitments on behalf of the whole community, collaboration in social initiatives...

It will not be easy. The important thing, as always, is having a group of believers who are more consciously aware and willing, as leaven that can impulse the process towards a transformation of the Christian community.

#### **4. Revive the prophetic spirit of the Jesus Movement**

The renewal needed by the Church today will not come about through institutional means but through ways opened by the prophetic spirit. Certainly, it is not possible to define the paths to the Spirit; however a climate can be created to help become more docile to the Spirit's action. Vital contact with Jesus and the internalization of his project of the Kingdom of God will foster this climate but perhaps we need to be concerned about channeling the prophetic potential of the people of God.

#### **Caring for the prophetic style of Jesus**

It needs to be well understood that Jesus is not a priest engaged in caring for and promoting the religion of the Temple. Neither is he taken for a Master of the Law dedicated to defending the legal framework. The country people of Galilee see in his liberating actions and in his fiery words the gestures of a man moved by the prophetic spirit: "A great prophet has arisen among us".<sup>13</sup> Jesus does not belong to the political structure nor to the religious institution. He has not been appointed by any authority, nor been ordained or anointed by anyone. His life is marked by the Spirit of God that sends him out to announce and promote God's Kingdom.

And so the small community which is growing around Jesus is not a new select religious group, in the style of the pure holy community of the Essenes of Qumran. Neither is it a rabbinical school. Jesus does not call them to study the Law nor to uphold the religious traditions. He calls them to initiate the humanizing project of the Father. He wants to associate them with his task and open pathways for the proclamation of the Kingdom of God. What grows up around Jesus is a prophetic movement whose identity will be to work with him for the cause of the Kingdom.

After twenty centuries of Christianity in which the spirit of Jesus has been 'frozen' in the Christian communities, we must rekindle his prophetic style. I want to point out just three features: his alternative presence in the midst of society, his prophetic indignation denouncing the obstacles to the Kingdom of God (the anti-kingdom) and his transmission of hope.

We have to take a lot more care of the alternative presence of the followers of Jesus. In the Galilee of the thirties in which the powerful are unaware of snatching the bread from the poor and where the privileged seek their own welfare by silencing the suffering of those who mourn, Jesus, like the Old Testament prophets, introduces an alternative way of understanding and living that reality in the light of God's compassion and in his desire for justice. Moreover, when the official religion of Jerusalem has accommodated itself to this unjust situation, when the religious interests of the Temple no longer coincide with the interests of God because the passion for the God of the poor has disappeared, being replaced by the God of order and worship... Jesus makes himself present in the synagogues and in the Temple with his way of interpreting and living religion according to God's truth.

We, as followers of Jesus, must also find our place in society, learning from his prophetic spirit to live an alternative, non-conformist and countercultural way. This must be a characteristic feature of the communities of Jesus. We are in the world but we are not of the world. We have to define ourselves. Jesus' way is not

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<sup>13</sup> Luke: 7, 16; Mark: 6,15; 8,27 – 28, etc.

expressed just in some occasional gestures and words. It is a lifestyle identified with the cause of those who suffer, and so it shakes generalized indifference and self-deception. We have to help one another to respond. We cannot serve the Kingdom of God and Mammon. We cannot live, earn, spend, buy or enjoy ourselves in any way at all in the midst of the present crisis. We have to exact of ourselves a lifestyle more consistent with the law of the Kingdom. To give just one example, I think the current crisis, as lived with the prophetic spirit of Jesus, is calling us to move gradually towards a more sober and austere way of life so as to share what we have and simply do not need, with those who are becoming increasingly in need of everything.

Indignation is the reaction of Jesus and of everyone who enters the dynamics of the Kingdom, in the face of the abuses and atrocities that crush the innocent. This indignation expresses the anger and helplessness of the victims, brings to light the hidden causes of their suffering and shakes social conscience. Such indignation is necessary so that confidence in life and hope in God is not quenched. When others remain silent out of unconsciousness, blindness, or cowardice, Jesus cries out in indignation. I often say that from the depths of his life and his message this cry resonates: the suffering of the innocent is to be taken seriously; it cannot be accepted as normal because it is unacceptable to God. As Jon Sobrino says, Jesus' followers would have to be, in many ways, "A voice for the voiceless, and a voice against those whose voice is too powerful".

Matthew's tradition expresses two cries that clearly indicate the direction of his indignation. The first is addressed to the Imperial system of Rome: "You see that the rulers of the Gentiles are lords over them, and their great ones have authority over them. Let it not be so among you"<sup>14</sup> God is against all oppressive power. The second is directed against the conventional religion of Jerusalem: "The scribes and the pharisees have the authority of Moses... They make hard laws and put great weights on men's backs; but they themselves will not put a finger to them". This is not to be. God is against all hurtful and dehumanizing religion. We need more outraged communities that express this spirit of Jesus in a society that shows little indignation in the face of injustice and in a Church that is too comfortable and indifferent.

The prophetic indignation is always accompanied by a struggle against skepticism and despair. We see this in Jesus' journey, which is capable of creating a new horizon of hope with his life and message in the society in which he moves. The Roman Empire claims that the "Pax Romana", in spite of its system of oppression and exploitation of the defeated peoples, brings full and definitive

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<sup>14</sup>Matthew: 20, 25-26; 23, 2-4

peace. The religion of the Temple argues that the Torah of Moses is immutable and eternal. Meanwhile, the victims of the Empire and those overlooked by official religion are doomed to live without hope. There may be some improvements in the functioning of the Imperial system, the Mosaic Law can be complied with more scrupulously, but nothing decisive will change for the poor: the world does not become more humane. Nobody knows how and from where a new hope for the marginalized could spring up.

Jesus breaks through that enclosed world announcing the irruption of the Kingdom of God. That situation, without an alternative and without hope, is false. And so it is today also. A different, more dignified, more just and happy society is possible, because God really wills it. It is possible to redirect human energies because God, the ultimate Mystery of reality, is always attracting us to a more humane world. We have to take this Good News seriously and believe in the transformative power of human beings drawn by God to a more humane life. We are not alone. Today God is also listening to the cry of those who suffer and to the labours, the efforts and the struggles of those who seek a more just world. This hope, which cannot be deduced from the present situation, is what we, as followers of Jesus, have to care for, nurture and irradiate from our Christian communities.

### **Opening channels to the prophetic potential of God's people**

The birth of the Church at Pentecost is described by Luke as the outpouring of the Spirit which, in the words of Joel, will be poured "upon all flesh", so that not only men but also women will prophesy, not only the elderly but the young too.<sup>15</sup> In the first communities that prophetic spirit is alive. Together with the apostles, the prophets are the "bedrock" of the communities. Paul asks the community of Thessalonica: "Do not quench the Spirit, do not despise prophecies".<sup>16</sup> However, during the Montanist crisis, prophecy begins to lose strength. According to Urs Von Balthasar, in the late second century, "a frost falls upon the spirit of the Church which has never been fully thawed"<sup>17</sup>. "In fact, over the centuries, the prophetic spirit continues to fade away being absorbed by other functions and institutional ministries".<sup>18</sup>

After the Vatican Council, it was Karl Rahner who more strongly denounced the spiritual and prophetic poverty of present day Christianity and who with most faith, called for a "Church of authentic spirituality" that is, open to the action of

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<sup>15</sup> Acts: 2, 17-21

<sup>16</sup> 1 Tes: 5, 19-20

<sup>17</sup> Quoted by N. Füglistler in *Conceptos Fundamentales de Teología*, Artículo Profeta, III, p.525

<sup>18</sup> However we must not forget the prophetic spirit that encourages the martyrs, monasticism and religious life charism... See J. Comblin, *A profecia na Igreja*, Paulus, 2008, 73-102

Spirit, not only through the institution, but also outside and alongside what is institutional.<sup>19</sup> But in our communities there is not only an absence of the prophetic spirit. There is something else. Over the last decades suspicion has grown up about anything new not coming from institutional guidelines or which does not comply with official doctrine. Therefore communities run the risk of anti-prophetic structures, incapacitating us all of discerning the signs of the times and of listening to the movements of the Spirit.

The impulse towards more prophetic communities cannot be led by the hierarchy or be sponsored by an institutional body. It is in those very communities that we must hear the call of Paul: "Seek love and aspire for the gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy".<sup>20</sup> To do this we must insist much more on vital contact with Jesus, on the faithful reception of his words, that "are spirit and life",<sup>21</sup> and on the internalization of his project for the Kingdom. Besides we can also open channels to the Spirit. I will only give some indications.

Firstly, breaking silences. Our communities are filled with silent, speechless Christians. We have to learn to give the word to the People of God, who have been silenced over the centuries. We need to pass from an authoritarian religion that creates passivity and infantilism to one of responsibility, participation and creativity. Let the simple good people of our communities express out loud good, constructive, liberating and consoling words which do not always have to come from what is established by custom, tradition, or institution, but from the Spirit of Jesus and from his clear commitment to the service of the Kingdom.

Secondly, let us free ourselves from so many fears that paralyze us from promoting conversion to Jesus. We have to resist always living from the logic of what was established or is customary. Let us not feel tied to an unchangeable past, designed and developed for other times and another society. Fear is perhaps our greatest sin. Fear paralyzes us, suffocates joy, makes us live under mistrust and suspicion, and stifles the freedom of the sons and daughters of God. Faith ends where fear begins. We need to breathe as soon as possible a friendlier climate in the Church of Jesus. Let us foster among ourselves confidence, friendliness, communication, daring, and a sincere search for evangelical truth.

Finally, let us rekindle hope, not just with words of encouragement and easy exhortations, but by building up new bases from which it is possible to live in hope. Let us look towards a new future which is hard to imagine if we start from

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<sup>19</sup> Karl Rahner, *Cambio estructural de la Iglesia*, Madrid. Cristiandad, 1974, 102 – 110

<sup>20</sup> 1 Cor: 14, 1-3

<sup>21</sup> John: 6, 63

the aging climate, pessimism and decadence we ourselves unconsciously feed into at times. This serene and confident gaze towards the future is not born from fanatical fundamentalist attitudes or reactions, but from the unmistakable peace that only Jesus communicates. We need to live together the experience of a new ecclesial beginning: to be born again by the Gospel to a new way of following Jesus. We must take steps towards the future knowing that what matters for the future of our communities are not the structures but our lifestyle, it is not numbers but the quality of our following of Jesus; it is not the experts but the witnesses. We must learn to live the Gospel by changing. Take leave of, without nostalgia, that which no longer opens doors to the Kingdom of God and be more attentive to the sources. Simply return to the original good news of the Gospel, knowing that what is new is not necessarily different, but something more coherent with and faithful to the Kingdom.

### **As a way of conclusion**

In no time our communities will be fewer and smaller. There is a risk that not a few of them will end up by living the Christian religion in an impoverished and decadent way. There will also be communities of those who feel really attracted to Jesus and his project. Everything will be more difficult and costly, but also simpler. The crisis will have stripped Christianity of many superfluous adherences to which we keep holding on. Surely there will be Christians returning to the essential. They will be fed by the Gospel rather than by doctrine. They will understand better than we do what it is to be "leaven", "salt" and "light" in the midst of the world. And God will continue promoting the Kingdom. Jesus has not given his best yet.