

Parishes in the New Evangelization Mode

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The call to evangelize, to share the “joy of the Gospel,” has always been at the forefront of the Church's mission. The summons of Jesus to go forth and make disciples never grows old. Jesus, the message to be proclaimed, is the same yesterday, today and forever (Heb 13:8). Persons, situations, cultures, however, change. And, they do change rapidly and incessantly, as the digital revolution and the information superhighway is frighteningly but exhilaratingly showing.

To make the joy of the Gospel contemporaneous to people of today, we cannot but engage in a renewed and revitalized evangelization. Without compromising our cherished Tradition and traditions, we have to adjust to the altered situations of our times. We may call this movement of adaptation, new evangelization; it is basically composed of three elements: new fervor, new methods, and new expression.

New fervor or new ardor is to rekindle the fire and our passion for Jesus. It is to encounter Jesus and be transformed by His saving love. New methods refer to the “how” of evangelization in the current context. How do we re-propose and transmit the message of Jesus to the present

generation and to the dominant culture of today? New expression refers to our search for a language, narrative, or images that can resonate well with the people, especially with the young ones, the “millennials” and the emerging Generation Z. If the Scripture is the Word of God in human words, what then are the expressions that can best “re-present” God’s message to us today?

A Changed Situation. According to a Social Weather Stations (SWS) survey conducted in April this year (2017), while a great majority of Filipino adults still identify themselves as Catholics (79%), only 41% (4 out of 10) of them attend church on a weekly basis. This is down by 23 points from 64% in 1991 or 26 years ago. This significant behavioral dip is disquieting, considering that weekly Mass attendance is one of the more important expressions of a person’s faith. The same survey also says that 85% considers religion as important in their life, while 15% says that it is not important. Again, this is portentous on two counts. If religion is still important for most Catholic adults (8 out of 10), how are they expressing it if they are not going to Mass? If religion is not very important (2%) and not at all important (13%), why do they still consider themselves as Catholics?

In America and Europe, the fastest rising “religious” group is the so-called “religious nones,” that is, those who do not identify with any religion or those who are religiously unaffiliated. According to a Pew Research Study in 2016, fully 23% of US adults now describe themselves as atheists, agnostics or “nothing in particular.” In the Philippines, this does not seem to be the case with only 0.05% declaring themselves as having no religion. This does not mean, however, that Filipinos are spared from the “crisis of faith” in the West. The drastic decline in religious participation and the apparent “spiritual hunger” of the youth are challenging us to look deeper. Jayeel Cornelio, a sociologist who investigated the religiosity of the Filipino youth, suggests that the latter exhibit a reflexive spirituality, one that is self-directed and critical of institutional expectations. If this is true, our parishes and churches have to respond to the nuanced needs of the young people and how they wish to express their faith.

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The National Filipino Catholic Youth Study (NFCYS) 2014 of the CBCP Episcopal Commission on Youth (ECY) and the Catholic Educational Association of the Philippines (CEAP) seems to confirm Cornelio’s observations. The NFCYS 2014 says that although there is a steady and firm commitment to the core beliefs of their Catholic tradition, the young people are also developing a personal spirituality quite apart from institutional

or formal religion. It then recommends that the Church, as an organized community, has to find a way to bridge the gap in the bi-polarity of its tradition (the objective content of religious doctrines vis-à-vis the subjective reality of spiritual experience).

It is evident from these cited studies that the contemporary Filipino man and woman are looking for God. Definitely, they are not “religious nones.” However, they find their religious communities inadequate in terms of responding to their spiritual longings and desires. There seems to be a disconnect between what they need and what they are being fed. This does not in any way diminish the importance of the Church’s “set menu.” This only calls us to think of more creative and palatable offerings. Taken negatively, this imagery of food reminds us of Pope Benedict XVI’s “cafeteria Christianity” or a DIY (do-it-yourself) religion where people take only what they want and conveniently dispose of what is distasteful to their senses. This is not the point we wish to advocate. What we want to pursue is the order of Jesus to his disciples which continues to reverberate in our parishes and communities today: “Feed them yourselves” (Mk 6:37)! Indeed, the Lord does not want us to dismiss the crowds and send them away to search for the “bread of life” on their own.

To Taste and See Change. Jesus is portrayed in many images in the Scriptures from the Old to the New Testament. He is portrayed as a servant, a shepherd, a gatekeeper, a carpenter, a teacher, a healer, a miracle-worker, etc. But we seldom, I think not at all, hear of Jesus being described as a chef or as a food connoisseur. But, if we search the instances when Jesus was talking about food or wine, we would not be surprised to find someone who loves good food and good company. Not because he was a glutton or a drunkard, as he lamented in Mt 11:19, but because table fellowship was his “marketing strategy” and changing water into wine or bread into his body, was his “business.” Jesus was more of a “foodie” than a carpenter or a fisherman.

This is the change we want to see—that Jesus may once again fill our jars to the brim and

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serve the best wine, that Jesus multiply the barley loaves and the fish, that Jesus prepare the most appetizing breakfast and supper for us. This will not happen if we do not explore the “culinary arts” of the banquet of Jesus. He was all about nourishing and serving at tables. His mission was all about giving drink to the thirsty and food for the hungry. All around the world, there is so much spiritual poverty and material famine and there is also so much plenty and throwaways. What we need to do now is to be engaged in the “feeding business.” Our communities should become “green houses” for organically healthy sustenance and restaurants for the starving. The word restaurant by the way comes from the French *restaurer* which means to restore or refresh. In a weary and undernourished world, may we offer as Jesus as the *restaurer*, the food that restores.

Unfortunately, this does not seem to be the case in many of our parishes today. If we are to have a health check of our churches, we would find that many are sick and unhealthy, if not dying and just managing the internal atrophy. We cannot point fingers and blame this person or that system. What we need to do is to allow the Spirit of Jesus once again to reanimate and redeem us. Although there is no panacea or a cure-all recipe for the renewal of our communities, there are some concrete steps we can take, not just to bring our parishes back to health, but to turn them into flourishing vineyards of the Lord.

The Church We Want to Be. The 2007 Aparecida Document, which is often attributed to the mind of Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio of Argentina (now Pope Francis), admitted this sad

reality of the Church, not just in South America but I think even here in the Philippines: “In our pastoral experience, often sincere people who leave our church do not do so because of what ‘non-Catholic’ groups believe, but fundamentally for what they live; not for doctrinal but for vivential reasons; not for strictly dogmatic, but for pastoral reasons; not due to theological problems, but to methodological problems of our Church. They hope to find answers to their concerns. They are seeking, albeit with serious dangers, answers to some aspirations that perhaps they have not found in the Church, as ought to be the case” (225). People leave the Church or if they stay, ignore the Church, not for doctrinal or “eternal” reasons. They do so for very human reasons—for belongingness and acceptance, for understanding and compassion, for love and solidarity. Thus, the Aparecida Document (226) proposes to enhance work in the Church along these four lines:





(1) *Religious Experience.* In our Church we must offer all our faithful “a personal encounter with Jesus Christ,” a profound and intense religious experience, a kerygmatic proclamation and the personal witness of the evangelizers that leads to a personal conversion and to a thorough change of life.

(2) *Community Life.* Our faithful are seeking Christian communities where they are accepted fraternally and feel valued, visible, and included in the Church. Our faithful must really feel that they are members of an ecclesial community and stewards of its development. That will allow for greater commitment and self-giving in and for the Church.

(3) *Biblical and Doctrinal Formation.* Along with a strong religious experience and notable community life, our faithful need to deepen their knowledge of the Word of God and the contents of the faith, because that is the only way to bring their religious experience to maturity. Along this

strongly experiential and communal path, doctrinal formation is not experienced as theoretical and cold knowledge, but as a fundamental and necessary tool in spiritual, personal, and community growth.

(4) *Missionary Commitment of the Entire Community.* We need a Church that goes out to meet those who are afar, is concerned about their situation so as to attract them once more to the Church and invite them to return to it.

These four crucial aspects constitute the elements for the transformation of our “well-manicured parishes” into sanctuaries of mission for the new evangelization. And, they are going to be “bruised, hurting and dirty,” but they will be robust and healthy.

The Appetizer. We have to acknowledge that not everyone (even if they have been baptized or confirmed) is ready to be evangelized. More often than not, they are still in the “pre-evangelization” stage, that is, they have no appetite

for our “religious stuff.” But, they want to be heard and given a “secure space” where they can be themselves without judgment or coercion. In his encounter with the woman at the well, Jesus did not right away talk about the living water. He asked for water! In our Church culture, we often ignore this stage. We think that everybody is ready to read the Bible or go to Mass every Sunday, or should be married in the Church, or be part of a BEC (basic ecclesial community). Sometimes they just need somebody to be there at the high noon of their life and be willing to have a little chat with them. Sometimes encounter and conversion is just a cup of water away.

Pope Benedict XVI said in *Deus Caritas Est* (1): “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.” Pope Francis quotes this same sentence in *Evangelii Gaudium* (8). In the transformation of our parishes, we have to begin with the dialogue of life and encounter of persons. And then, like Andrew bringing his brother to

Jesus, we introduce people to Jesus. There is no other person who is more interested in persons than Jesus. Through our friendship with Jesus, we humbly facilitate the encounter of Jesus with his new disciples.

The Ambience. Creating the right atmosphere for people to feel that they are welcomed and treated as members of a family is what community life is all about. Many of our Churches have the feel of a museum or worse a mausoleum, instead of a vibrant and pulsating community of life and vitality. Instead of opening our doors and “sharing the journey,” we make people feel that they are unwanted and excluded. Our structures, spaces and schedules sometimes are designed more for self-convenience instead of service for others.

The Main Course. The main dish, of course, is our full participation in everything that Jesus has left us. Through catechesis and the sacraments, through our rich religious heritage and traditions, we are nourished continually by the depth and the breadth of the awesome beauty and grandeur





of God in the Church. It is the heroic lives of the saints, the tremendous intellectual articulations of the Councils and theologians, the breath-taking masterpieces of artists and geniuses, the steadfast witness of ecclesial solidarity and charity, and so many other things that make us who we are, a community that awaits the coming and the fulfillment of the Kingdom.

Going Forth. The abundance of God's banquet is not just for a few invited guests. It is meant for all. Go out into the main roads and invite to the feast whomever you find (Mt 22:9). This is our mission and our mandate. Missionary transformation is no longer an option. It is a necessary pivot if we are to be true to ourselves as disciples of Jesus. Jesus commissioned his disciples: "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the

Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Mt 28:19-20).

To go. To make disciples. To baptize. To teach. Simple enough, but for the longest time we seem to have missed its logic and appropriate order. We have been serving the main course of baptizing and teaching. And, we get frustrated because the guests are not coming and if they come, they come both listless and lethargic. It is about time we talk about appetizers, ambience and takeaways!

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