

October 25: Reading the “Signs of the Times”

Jesus speaks about “reading signs” in today’s Gospel, interpreting life’s events in order to discern God’s will. Indeed, to more adequately respond to God’s call to mission, we need to astutely understand the diverse challenges and demands of evangelization in the modern world. In *Evangelii Gaudium* (*The Joy of the Gospel*), Pope Francis exhorts all Christians to an “ever watchful scrutiny of the signs of the times” (51). Evangelizers must be attentive to “the promptings of the Holy Spirit who helps us together to read the signs of the times” (14).

For Francis, this task of examining current realities in the light of Christian faith is “a grave responsibility” (51). He proposes using “an evangelical discernment” which is “the approach of a missionary disciple” who is guided by “the light and strength of the Holy Spirit” (50). Christian faith demands “recognizing and discerning spirits” and ultimately “choosing movements of the spirit of good and rejecting those of the spirit of evil” (51).

Saint John XXIII, who summoned Vatican II, popularized the expression “signs of the times.” Here one finds the beginnings of a pivotal direction in theological methodology: linking the Gospel with the human family “with all its tragedies and struggles, its hopes and aspirations, its strengths and weaknesses” (183). This approach is manifested in one of Francis’ quotes from Pope Paul VI: “We know that ‘evangelization would not be complete if it did not take account of the increasing interplay of the Gospel and of humanity’s concrete life, both social and personal’” (181).

This “signs of the times” method is found in some Council documents; the best known passage is from *Gaudium et Spes*: “The Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel” (4). This key imperative remains a permanent task in missionary evangelization.