



PASTORAL CONVERSION

The highly provocative words of Pope Francis to the Roman clergy gathered in St. John Lateran Basilica, Rome, on 16 September 2013, are still very pertinent today. On that occasion, while responding to questions asked of him by some parish priests of the Urbe region, the Holy Father reminded the clergy of the need for genuine pastoral conversion in both one's life and in the mission of the Church. The Pope said that in carrying out their pastoral service, priests must not confuse creativity with simply doing something new. Creativity, he said, "looks for paths to proclaim the Gospel and this is not easy. It doesn't mean just changing things. Something else is involved—that "something" comes from the Spirit and is the result of prayer, of contact with the people. We must seek new paths—this is what pastoral conversion means.... We must welcome others; we must offer them warm hospitality so that they feel comfortable—at home—when they come to church."

The Holy Father invites pastoral workers clearly and repeatedly (cf. his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*) to distinguish *doing* from *being*, saying that the latter should constitute the heart and soul of every pastoral plan of action. It is the word "conversion" that provides an immediate clue as to what position must be firmly taken, otherwise the adjective "pastoral" that precedes it would

not make sense. If, in fact, pastoral action is linked to *being*, it is because that action is inseparably connected to life: through the mediation of the pastoral worker, it is translated into praxis.

The whole Christian life is an ongoing experience of conversion based on the most important turning point in human history: the fact that God himself comes to human beings to convert them to himself through a covenant of love. We have access to God only because he reaches out to us.

Metanoia is part of the content of Old Testament prophecy (Ezekiel, Jeremiah, etc.). The prophets proclaimed that a time would come when God would remove the human being's heart of stone and give him/her a new heart, a new way of thinking and desiring, a new method of integration—one of totality. Thus the word *metanoia* is a prophetic word, a promise: thanks to God's promise, human beings have received a gift and, along with that gift, a duty. It is therefore important that one's theological vision and catechetical/pastoral work emphasize divine action: God fixed his gaze on human beings in the form of his only-begotten Son through the work of the Holy Spirit. From this springs the call, the invitation, the honor and the duty of human beings to fix our own gaze, mind, will and heart—in short, our entire being—on him.

According to the prophets, the heart of *metanoia* lies in the New Covenant: God himself transforms the meaning of history.

The coming of Christ is the great transformation—*above all, a transformation on the level of mind.*

In this regard, the concluding message of the Congress for Italian Missionaries in Argentina (10-14 January 2011) is very illuminating. This reflection, entitled *Mission and Pastoral Conversion in an Age of Cultural Pluralism*, says very clearly that “pastoral conversion requires a change of thought regarding the times, places, content and organization of pastoral work: basically, it involves a *change of methodology*.”

It is obvious that this must take place while keeping firmly in mind that the *ecclesial structure* is an integral part of the conversion process—of what is taking shape—and cannot be discarded. In fact, the mystery of the Incarnation itself is the structural form of the evangelizing presence of God in Jesus Christ.

The concluding document of the Aparecida meeting proposes that the structure be maintained but that discernment be *communitarian, not vertical*, in character.

Consequently, keeping in mind the need to reform outdated pastoral and ecclesial structures (not eliminate them), we are able to pinpoint *a number of concrete paths to follow*:

1. First of all, to move from pastoral action directed to the “masses” to pastoral action directed to the person—an action that focuses more on the individual than on the totality of the target group. It concerns “personalizing one’s pastoral action”—something which the

Year of the Priest (2009-2010) reminded us to do through the figure of the Curé of Ars.

2. To move from teaching about the sacraments to initial evangelization through *the witness of one’s life*. I can’t help others get to know the love of Christ if I don’t “infect” them with my own love for him.

3. To offer a *catechesis based on life experience*, not method. That is to say: to show others how to live the Christian life through concrete behavior, helping them move toward a personal meeting with Christ.

4. To cultivate an *attitude of kindness and acceptance of everyone*, above all those who are different, avoiding discrimination, moral judgments and rash judgments.

5. To *change one’s way of thinking* so as to facilitate a reawakening or else the birth of faith; to reflect the image of a Church that facilitates—not blocks—a meeting with Christ and, consequently, the life of faith.

6. To create a *missionary mentality*: to form missionary groups in parishes and schools (at least Catholic schools).

7. Finally, to concretely witness to a life of *communion and fraternity* among priests and within religious institutes, motivating everyone to do this and asking the help of the bishops, in keeping with the advice of Jesus Master, who left us the spiritual testament: “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (Jn. 17:21).

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