

To Participants at the International Meeting of New Evangelization

The Challenge of Enflaming Our Hearts

Pope Francis

On September 21, 2019, Pope Francis spoke to attendees at an international meeting organized by the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization. He identified a series of indispensable conditions capable of still ensuring an encounter with God for the men and women of our times despite the signs that obscure his presence. Instead of pretending to have immediate or ready-made answers, it is a question of leaving room for the Holy Spirit's 'creative force': one able to offer life-giving words that not only speak of God but transmit him to others.

You have reflected on a central theme for evangelization: how to ignite the desire to know God despite the signs that obscure His presence. In this sense, Luke's Gospel offers us a good starting point when it tells of the two disciples who went to Emmaus: Christ was there, walking with them, but because of the discouragement they had in their hearts they were not able to recognize Him (cf. Lk 24: 13-27). This is also the case for many of our contemporaries: God is close to them, but they cannot recognize Him. It is said that once Pope John, meeting a journalist who told him he did not believe, replied: "Relax! That's what you say! God doesn't know it, and He considers you as a son to whom He loves all the same". The secret, then, lies in feeling, together with one's own uncertainties, the wonder of this presence. It is the same amazement that Emmaus' disciples felt: "Did not our hearts burn within us while He talked to us on the road, while He opened to us the Scriptures?" (v. 32). Enflaming hearts is our challenge.

Often it happens that the Church is a cold memory for the man of today, if not a crushing disappointment, as the story of Jesus had been for the disciples of Emmaus. Many, especially in the West, have the impression of a Church that does not understand them and is far from their needs. Some, then, who would like to follow the non-evangelical logic of relevance, judge the Church too weak in relation to the world, while others still see it as too powerful in comparison with the great poverties of the world. I would say that it is right to be concerned, but above all to be engaged, when one perceives a *worldly* Church – that is, one that follows the criteria of success of the world and forgets that she exists to proclaim not herself, but Jesus. A Church worried about defending her good name, who struggles to renounce what is not essential, which no longer feels the passion of bringing the Gospel into today's world. And it ends up being a beautiful museum piece rather than the simple and joyful home of the Father. [...]

Yet there are many children whom the Father wishes to make “feel at home”; they are our brothers and sisters who, while benefiting from many technical achievements, live absorbed by the vortex of great frenzy. And while they are carrying deep wounds inside and struggling to find a stable job, they find themselves surrounded by an external well-being that anesthetizes them within and distracts them from courageous choices. How many people close to us live always in a hurry, as slaves to what should help them to feel better and forget the taste of life: the beauty of a large and generous family which fills the day and night but expands the heart, the brightness that is in the eyes of children that no smartphone can give, the joy of simple things, the serenity that gives prayer. What our brothers and sisters often ask of us, perhaps without being able to ask the question, corresponds to their deepest needs: to love and be loved, to be accepted for what one is, to find peace of heart and a joy that is more lasting than entertainment.

We have experienced all this in one word, indeed in one person, Jesus. We who, though fragile and sinful, have been inundated by the river in full flow that is God’s goodness, have this mission: to encounter our contemporaries so as to make His love known to them. Not so much by teaching, never by judging, but by being travelling companions. [...] How important it is to feel challenged by the questions of the men and women of today! Without pretending to have immediate answers and without giving prepackaged answers, but sharing *words of life*, not aimed at making proselytes, but at leaving room for the creative force of the Holy Spirit, Who frees the heart from the slavery that oppresses and renews it. Transmitting God, then, is not talking about God, it is not justifying His existence: even the devil knows that God exists! To proclaim the Lord is to witness to the joy of knowing Him, it is to help live the beauty of encountering Him. God is not the answer to an intellectual curiosity or to a commitment of the will, but an experience of love, called to become a story of love. [...]

“God is love” (1 Jn 4: 8), says the Scripture. He uses the verb “to be” because God is like this, He does not vary according to how we behave: He is unconditional love, He does not change, despite all the things we do. As the Psalm says: “His love is for ever”. (Psalm 136.1). It is love that is not consumed, as in the scene of the burning bush when God, revealing His name for the first time, also used the verb “to be”: “I am who I am!” (Ex 3: 14). How beautiful it is to announce this faithful God, a fire that is not consumed, to our brothers and sisters who live in tepidness because the first enthusiasm has cooled. How beautiful it is to say to them: “Jesus Christ loves you, He gave His life to save you, and now He is living at your side every day” (Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, 164).

In the light of this *kerygma* the life of faith develops, which is not a complicated construction made up of many bricks to be put together, but the ever new discovery of the “fundamental nucleus”, the beating “heart of the Gospel ... the beauty of the saving love of God made manifest in Jesus Christ Who died and rose from the dead” (*ibid.*, 36). The Christian life is always renewed with this first proclamation. [...] Otherwise, there is a subtle presumption that to be more “solid” means to become educated, experts in sacred things (cf. Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christus vivit*, 214). But God’s wisdom is granted to the poor in spirit, to those who remain with Jesus, loving everyone in His name.

One last thing I would like to share with you. Since faith is a life that is born and reborn from the encounter with Jesus, that which in life is an encounter helps us to grow in faith: approaching those in need, building bridges, serving those who suffer, caring for the poor, “anointing with patience” those who are close to us, comforting those who are discouraged,

blessing those who harm us... In this way we become living signs of the Love we proclaim.

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