

## The challenge of a new Christian narrative

# Capturing the Essential with new words

**Luigino Bruni**

*In large areas of the world, Christianity is undergoing a profound narrative crisis. The challenge lies in finding a new narrative that enables others to understand not only the meaning of its social and educational role, but the death-and-resurrection of Christ, the Eucharist, Salvation, Grace and the Eschaton. The author of this article is a member of the editorial board of the newspaper Avvenire. Appearing on radio and TV, and widely recognized for his writings on the economy, Bruni is a professor of economic politics at the Libera Università Di Maria Assunta ([l.bruni@lumsa.it](mailto:l.bruni@lumsa.it)) and the Sofia Institute (Loppiano, Italy).*

The story of Christianity, and not only its beginning, is the unfolding of a great narrative; a story of 'good news' that has spoken of the Christ event and its meaning to people down through the centuries and continues to speak to them today. The entire Bible is one great narrative that has remained alive for more than three thousand years because hundreds of generations on a few special evenings each year as well as at moments of great crisis, have retold its many beautiful stories to one another - the Call of a wandering Aramean who heard a Voice that was different and true; the son saved by an angel and a ram; the sea whose waters rolled back and the crossing over to freedom and the promised land; the golden calf; the exile and the return; the Logos who became a carpenter and spoke words that were wonderful and different; who died on a cross and was then seen alive by his friends. For as long as it is still being lived and believed, the telling of the great human story of the Bible will go on.

Believing in the wondrous story, which then becomes one's own beautiful story, is the basis of biblical faith. Each time Christianity is welcomed into a new culture, the original story is handed on by people and communities who have managed to capture the same story and experience but tell it differently from the previous generation. And new spiritual treasures kept the narrative always new. The same is true of the Gospel narratives; the evangelists recount the original words and deeds of Jesus but enrich their narrative with their own their understanding and that of their communities of those same words and deeds of Jesus. In most cases, this has brought us greater understanding of the message of

Jesus and the apostles despite being linked to a particular socio-cultural context; but in some cases, it has also complicated our understanding; for example, the use of 'economic' terms, led to the Christian-held idea of a Father who desired his Son's blood to be shed as the 'price' to be 'paid' for the forgiveness of sins. After centuries, modern exegesis and historical studies are helping us return to the original meaning of some of the stories.

Saint Paul was truly innovative because he worked new elements into the story of Christ, Salvation, The Law and Agape. St Francis of Assisi and other great reformers of Christianity also wrote many an enlightened page because they knew how to relate the *same* events and the *same* story whilst sharing stories of their own. Jesus spoke about the poor in a beautiful way but the words spoken and lived by Francis, similar and different, were no less beautiful than those used by Jesus and in this way he kept the Gospel alive and attracted many followers. Following his example, a great many men and women have carried out similar works, drawing out both ancient and new narrative elements from the great treasure chest of the traditional story.

### **The risk of losing the original DNA**

There is, however, a definitive point in the very act of creating new narratives and stories at which it is possible to distinguish between reform and heresy. New narratives almost always arise out of a crisis of identity as the stories attract and touch people less and less. Having told the age-old stories for so long, we become aware that, more or less with good reason, the stories are no longer convincing or attractive - rather they mislead people because they are devoid of a sense of 'vocation'. Such crises are deep and definitive because when the original story no longer interests others, the narrator himself loses interest and experiences the same crisis.

Out of this awareness many mistakes can and do happen. One of the most common is that in our efforts to create new stories that are more appealing and 'understandable', we lose the essence, the DNA, of the original story. At last people understand but that is simply because we are telling *another* story. So it could happen that a religious order whose charism is founded upon evangelizing the family, after decades of announcing its *mission* in the same way as previous generations, gradually starts to focus on other issues: adoption, natural family planning or political issues, thereby telling a new story that is much closer to the cultural changes of the time, easier to explain and understand, and more suited to attracting funding and benefactors. However, the key problem, which remains hidden, is that the community is drifting away from its own special charism and becomes no more than a resource, eventually reduced to a few words printed on a Christmas card. It clings to the stories which explain the work that it is involved in - but

these are only the outward expression, the social and cultural aspects of a charism whose real story is being buried deeper and deeper because it is expressed in old-fashioned language, less understandable today. This is where we face the greatest challenge as most of the DNA which a charism contains lies hidden at its very core which is the hardest part of all to translate into new words. And so, almost always, as new narratives focus on less important aspects and remember less and less the original gift, the religious community grows into something else, scarcely even noticing that this process of change is taking place.

### **Capturing the essential with new words**

Something of this kind is happening to Christianity today. Over the past few decades the Christian churches have found themselves facing a crisis of narrative that is both serious and profound. In Europe and many parts of the world, language and communication has changed at such a fast rate that telling the Christian story and experience is more complex than ever before. Today, when a young person walks past a church, it is not easy to understand what goes on inside; they may wish to pray, but can no longer remember any prayers, their heart no longer recalls their parents' expressions or words; the names of Jesus, Mary or the saints no longer have any meaning.

In the 20th century, even an atheist knew what went on inside a church despite never going inside. Today, the situation has radically changed. When Christians try to tell the same stories as they used to, they find themselves describing words of love in a language that is meaningless. As regular as clockwork, they fall into the temptation of mistakenly presenting only the social aspects, the outreach, because they are easier to understand. The Church increasingly resembles an NGO (in the words of Pope Francis) and since we are all familiar with NGO's, the temptation is even greater to tell the story of Christianity in terms of an NGO.

The great narrative challenge of the Church today is not about communicating the meaning of its social and educational works, but, rather, the death-and-resurrection of Christ; the Eucharist; Salvation; Grace and the Escaton, our final destiny after death, which is not a disappearance into nothingness but an unimaginable fullness of life forever. Our greatest challenge lies in how we tell the story, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and several other unheard prophets of the 20th century already understood. For if the Church does not find a new language to pass on her faith, handed down by the apostles and kept alive for centuries, then this tradition, which is so essential to her, will be interrupted.

That it is possible to tell the story in a new way, with all the essential elements of faith, is already seen in the experience of the very first Christians when St Paul achieved what seemed impossible to his contemporaries: the task of communicating the very person and message of Christ to the gentiles who were considered external to the story of the chosen people. Paul managed to separate the essence of the Christian charism from the cultural context of the time and place in which it occurred. Similar achievements, though less radical, have taken place in the following centuries with the inculturation of Christianity first in the Greco-Roman world, then in the Celtic world and later in China (Matteo Ricci) and Africa.

Today, like St Paul, we find ourselves at a radical turning-point in the narrative. We are faced with telling the Christian event to a world that is once more populated by 'gentiles'. Like the apostles, Christians need to develop new ways of telling the story that can be understood by the new gentiles, mirroring the action of the early Church in what was a difficult phase full of conflict.

So how should we act? We need a great deal of training. There is an urgent need for individuals and communities to engage courageously in a new narrative with which to communicate the truths of their faith and above all their Christian experience. A training which aims not so much to speak about the Church's social actions but rather the very heart of the Christian event; that seeks to explain the Eucharist to those who have never heard of transubstantiation; the resurrection, to a world mesmerized or disillusioned with material goods; the meaning of the incarnation to those who increasingly live their lives on-line.

Achieving the task will only be possible if the turning-point of the narrative takes place first at a grass roots level and then the theological level (still permeated by theories which are difficult or impossible to grasp). Our personal and collective experience of faith, lived, imagined and told according to the culture of our times - even a history which would include that which is still to come - will provide the means to fill the gaps in our language and culture that are waiting to be filled.