

## Reflections on a recent Vatican Instruction

# Toward a Missionary Parish

**Archbishop Jorge Carlos Patrón Wong,**  
Secretary for Seminaries in the Congregation for the Clergy

In July 2020, the Vatican Congregation for the Clergy published the Instruction, *The pastoral conversion of the parish community in the service of the evangelising mission of the Church*. The document, developed from experiences of ecclesial life worldwide, aims to both encourage bishops, priests, and laity to reflect on the change of epoch in which we are living, and to recall those canonical norms that offer the basis for concrete, creative initiatives regarding new ways of living the parish pastorate.

For years, particularly in the Western Church, there have been discussions on the crisis in the handing down of the faith. Obviously, there are many reasons behind the 'loss' of a sense of God. But rather than slowing down further to analyze the reasons, the Christian community today is called to renew its push to evangelize.

Pope Francis' magisterium is a constant invitation to recover, as a Church and individually, the heart of Christian mission, to proclaim the joy of the Gospel and enable a true, living encounter with Jesus. This is only possible, however, with what the Holy Father refers to in his apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, as

[ . . . ] a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for her self-

preservation. The renewal of structures demanded by pastoral conversion can only be understood in this light: as part of an effort to make them more mission-oriented, to make ordinary pastoral activity on every level more inclusive and open, to inspire in pastoral workers a constant desire to go forth and in this way to elicit a positive response from all those whom Jesus summons to friendship with himself. (EG, 27)

This horizon of desired renewal in missionary awareness is delineated in this recent Instruction of the Congregation for the Clergy, *The pastoral conversion of the parish community at the service of the Church's evangelizing mission*.

### Background and aims of the Instruction

The document arose from a long, complex effort with other Vatican dicasteries, as well as

from attempts to gather and synthesize what emerged from listening to real experiences of ecclesial life throughout the world. If, based on *Evangelii gaudium* and other subsequent magisterial interventions, an evangelical renewal is both needed and encouraged by many recent studies of the health of Christian communities, one cannot fail to include a reflection on the parish as well.

Although the parish is central to the transmission of the faith, at times it appears weighed down by many problems. This is particularly true in our rapidly changing world marked by constant movement. Parishes can run the risk of immobility and excessive imprisonment in structures and languages that no longer effectively provide for a proclamation of the Gospel.

Instead, Pope Francis reminds us that parishes are not fixed and 'outdated' institutions. Rather, they are 'flexible' realities called to 'assume quite different contours depending on the openness and missionary creativity of the pastor and the community' (EG, 28).

So, the Instruction arose from the urgent need to propose a theme of parish renewal in a missionary sense. On the one hand it aims at stimulating reflection among all those engaged in pastoral activity – bishops, priests, and laypeople – regarding this change of epoch in which we are living, and a possible pastoral implementation of 'the outgoing Church' spoken of by Pope Francis. On the other, it aims at recalling those canonical norms that provide for concrete, creative, experimental possibilities, ones that include new ways of living the pastoral reality of the parish.

Thus, this document's importance lies in its stating, above all, that the Church is a place for all, a place where each person can, and should, find their specific vocation at the service of evangelization. At the same time, while without significant juridical innovations, it desires to propose pastoral options already emerging – such as pastoral units. It can be useful, too, in clarifying, correcting and especially encouraging them. It cites specific references to today's cultural context and the need to proclaim the Gospel.

### **Parish conversion in a changed world**

The Instruction's main aim is generally not one of focusing on relatively marginal aspects, though in some cases these are also important. Rather, it places itself within the extended reflections that began with the Second Vatican Council and considers the noteworthy social and cultural changes of recent decades as well as the reorganization of parish pastoral care provided by the local Church. It states: "The situations outlined in the following Instruction represent a valuable opportunity for pastoral conversion that is essentially missionary. Parish communities will find herein a call to go out of themselves, offering instruments for reform, even structural, in a spirit of communion and collaboration, of encounter and closeness, of mercy and solicitude for the proclamation of the Gospel." (2)

It is a matter of looking for new ways to proclaim the Gospel, starting from the realization that the history of parish communities was long carried forward according to a vision of the surrounding world that no longer reflects today's reality. Prior ways of considering a parish's relationship with the surrounding locale now seems inadequate.

The Instruction notes that contemporary society is marked by increasing mobility. People, especially in big cities, are in constant movement within an ever-changing context. Parishes, on the other hand, still revolve around static pastoral structures built for a society that has, in the meantime, undergone a radical transformation. Today, the Instruction affirms, territories are no longer simple 'geographic' concepts, but 'existential' and relational ones. It is a context in which people express their personal and professional relationships in ways that go far beyond fixed and limited geographic locations.

A pastoral conversion capable of overcoming parishes locked into territorial limits is needed to increase their vitality through what could be called, 'trans-parochial' evangelization initiatives.

In this sense, the document looks ahead towards pastoral re-organization, already underway in some places, under the headings of pastoral units and pastoral regions. This is not a matter of simply uniting parishes for organizational reasons or due to priest shortages. Rather it is to give rise to a more intermediate reality between that of the diocese and individual parishes. These would be guided by an episcopal vicar or parish moderator, one who would facilitate relationships between priests and laypeople along with suggestions for evangelization and a deepening of the faith more suited to the present situation.

To do this, the Instruction takes care to recall and articulate present canonical norms, so bishops and their collaborators have a working instrument for the good of the Christian community at their disposal.

### **The importance of formation**

Of course, believers must internalize a document in their lives for it to be effective. Structural reform can only come about through personal – and in this case communal – conversions of mentality. A deep investment in both priestly and lay formation is needed to go beyond the limited scope of one's own parish to work synergistically with other communities and openly face the challenges of an entire region.

On the one hand, priests should be better accompanied, especially in their early formation, so they do not think of themselves as the 'boss' of the flock nor as 'lone rangers'. The *Ratio fundamentalis*, issued by the Congregation for the Clergy in 2016, states that priestly formation should focus on developing greater capacities for relating to others. In this way, after ordination, a priest will be able to insert himself into the family of the presbyterate and a live-in priestly fraternity. It should become their way of carrying out their ministry, praying, reflecting, planning joint pastoral initiatives, and, even learning to work together where needed.

At the same time, it will be important to look at the obligation to form priests as fathers and pastors of all, as persons in generous and welcoming service, capable of reaching out to the whole Christian community and animating the various charisms present there. If a priest is too narrowly linked to a single charism – such as that of his own association or movement --he risks closure in ways that will prevent him from animating and evangelizing the entire people of God, and the parish as a whole, and in ways necessary for 'going out' to the world.

Laity, too, need to recover the meaning of their baptism and the mission that follows from that. There is a need to learn to live pastoral co-responsibility to build up of the Church and to evangelize. Sufficient formation should avoid 'clericalizing' laity. Rather, through a mutual appreciation of charisms and living one's own vocation for the Church's edification, laity are called not only to cooperate with the priest, but accompany and support him, recognizing his specific, sacramental function in guiding the community.

These important and needed challenges can renew the parish and render it ever more capable of proclaiming the joy of the Gospel.