

Which path for our journey?

The Holy Spirit and the Church Today

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In this moment of radical changes, we are also experiencing an exceptional, ecclesial springtime. It's a time of calling all God's people to reform, to a new point of departure rooted in the radicalism of the Gospel and under the guidance of the Spirit, rather than one of merely adapting to the winds of change. But what are the roads, both those well-traveled and those uncharted, along which we must travel? Theologian Piero Coda, member of the International Theological Commission and dean of Sophia University Institute (Loppiano – Florence, Italy) speaks to this question, together with three contributions: from the ecumenical world, Latin America, and Asia. For an African perspective, we refer you to Innocent Thibaut's article in this same issue.

The Holy Spirit continually speaks to the Church as she journeys along the path of history. And not only by reminding us of the timeliness of Jesus' words or rendering their message ever more vital and urgent than in the past: The Spirit also speaks through invocations - expressed and unexpressed - of the suffering and wounded, of those searching and crying out. The Holy Spirit speaks through silence and through yearnings more eloquent than any discourse; through the deepest, most inexpressible cries of so many – of all of us – in the quest for understanding.

A Call to Conversion

As we look at the face of the Church today --- which is none other than a portion of humanity itself, enduring joys, hopes, grief, and fears, in Jesus (cf. GS 1) -- we are assailed by conflicting emotions.

On one hand, there is joy and exuberance: as if things are being put right again (which is true!) and we can now take a deep breath of fresh air. But, on the other, a sense of pain and desolation as we focus, even for an instant, on the silent inertia or, even worse, the small, visible faction reacting with hostility and resistance that serves only to confuse the faithful. All this, without even mentioning the explosive, ongoing emergence of toxic wounds that are continuously coming to light.

And, here is where we need to be careful! Only mature reflection on these conflicting emotions, purified and transformed by faith, will allow us to discern the words that the Spirit wants to say to us.

Could it not be said that Pope Francis' magisterium, through his words, gestures and, above all, his lifestyle, is paving the way for a new phase in the journey of God's People? He's brought again to the forefront the diverse and interrelated teachings and directives of Vatican II with decisive and efficacious impact, leaving no stone unturned and nothing taken for granted. By translating them into various endeavors of ecclesial mission and linking them once again to their original evangelical power, they can be re-envisioned and reformed with creative faithfulness. The powerful emergence of an event of this magnitude, coupled with the importance of the Bishop of Rome's particular ministry and charism for the universal Church, have clearly left no person or reality untouched.

The reactions and resistance to this wave of renewal – even considering typical misunderstandings that inevitably arise in all human interactions -- clearly shows what is at stake by re-launching enactment of reforms first inaugurated by the Vatican Council. Despite countless invaluable benefits already accomplished on many levels (rediscovery of the collective conscience of God's People, liturgical reform, re-introduction of Episcopal collegiality, participation of laity in ecclesial mission, new experiential forms of Christian communities in society, and new horizons for dialogue), there is still the impression that things remain undone or have even come to a complete halt, instead of continuously moving forward.

It is like being stuck in the middle of a shallow river crossing with no possibility of turning back - as some who are still rooted in the past would like to do – yet not knowing how to free oneself in order to move ahead.

On one hand, hideous scandals of pedophilia, abuse, and conflicts of power in the ecclesial underworld, and vindictive accusations against the magisterium of Pope Francis on the other, clearly demonstrate a betrayal that shouldn't be taken lightly by the Church today, a Church which the Spirit is so urgently calling to immediate conversion and reform.

Participation of all God's People

Responding, in his *Letter to the People of God* (August 20, 2018) to the intense and almost insufferable shame and pain caused by “sexual abuse, the abuse of power and the abuse of conscience perpetrated by a significant number of clerics and consecrated persons”, Pope Francis emphasized “the extent and the gravity of all that has happened requires coming to grips with this reality in a *comprehensive and communal way*”. In doing so, the Pope had the courage to put his finger in the wound and, at the same time, clearly indicate the remedy needed for healing to occur.

This terrible scandal has touched large sections of Catholic clergy, and, as a result, the life of entire local Churches. It clearly indicates that a certain formation model and practice of ordained ministry, as well as some ways of conceptualizing and envisioning the Church, have all become obsolete. And where this kind of reality still exists, the Church can still easily fall prey to evil perversions that risk jeopardizing her identity and mission, blurring her countenance as the Bride of Christ. We cannot continue mending a dress that's been torn apart! The dress needs to be changed. As Vatican II indicated: this can be done by inserting ordained ministry into the fundamental journey of the People of God as they move “outside the camp” (cf. *Heb* 13, 13).

Isn't this what Pope Francis is asking? In the above-mentioned *Letter*, he stated: “...every one of the baptized should feel involved in the ecclesial and social change that we so greatly need. This

change calls for a personal and communal conversion that makes us see things as the Lord does. [...] It is impossible to think of a conversion of our activity as a Church that *does not include the active participation of all the members of God's People*. Indeed, whenever we have tried to replace, or silence, or ignore, or reduce the People of God to small elites, we end up creating communities, projects, theological approaches, spiritualities and structures without roots, without memory, without faces, without bodies and ultimately, without lives."

"Sense of the faith" and "charismatic gifts"

This is both the diagnosis and the remedy for healing wounds and allowing us to continue moving forward, keeping our gaze fixed on Jesus, on his Church, and on history.

Today, the Spirit addresses each and every component of God's People in their vast, rich array of vocations, charisms, talents, capacities, and cultural expressions. It's a call to journey together along the pathway of renewal: through shared experiences and in the joy which overflows from freedom and fraternity, so freely given to us by Jesus. To this end, as Pope Francis so forcefully affirmed, we need to listen lovingly to the cries of our people and discern God's voice through them; we need to listen to God's heart in order to discern the merciful echo of his people's cries present there.

Now is the time to listen to everyone, to dialogue with all, and to discern together.

The Council's doctrine on *sensus fidei* ('sense of the faith'), which every disciple of Christ possesses (cf. LG 12), invites us to take off our sandals in front of the 'sacred ground' of the other (cf. EG 169). This not only refers to the sphere of Church life and the proclamation and witness of the Gospel; it also applies to the active and efficacious presence of Jesus' disciples in the living fabric of civil and political communities, where they can give a living, responsible, and efficacious contribution, guided by a well formed Christian conscience (cf. GS 43).

In order to interpret the signs of the times in light of the Gospel we need to listen – specifically and forcefully – to the voice of the Spirit who speaks to the Church through gifts of charisms and the witness of saints. As *Lumen gentium* states: "In the lives of those who, sharing in our humanity, are, however, more perfectly transformed into the image of Christ, (cf. 2Cor 3, 18) God vividly manifests His presence and His face to men. He speaks to us in them, and gives us a sign of His Kingdom, to which we are strongly drawn, having so great a cloud of witnesses over us (Heb 12, 1) and such a witness to the truth of the Gospel" (n. 50).

Following a first push by John Paul II, and then again later by Pope Francis, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith published, *Iuvenescit Ecclesia*, which delineates that 'hierarchical gifts' and 'charismatic gifts' are co-essential. It is based on the Council's doctrine of ecclesiology and the tangible experience of the Church in recent decades in which, together with communities of consecrated life brought about by the Spirit through the centuries, there was a blossoming of movements and ecclesial communities. This strategic document clearly states that these charisms are a constitutive dimension of the edification and mission of the Church.

We hope such a theological statement, which is of similar importance to the statement affirming equal dignity of all faithful by virtue of the Sacraments of Christian initiation, may create growing awareness and concrete change at the pastoral level. Without doubt, it asks a change of perspective on the part of pastors, and, at a communitarian level, on the part of the local Church as well. However, it also entails that communities of Consecrated life, Movements and new

Communities “go forth” beyond their own boundaries (even risking loss of their own specific styles and initial inspirations) to share that yeast of the Spirit from which they were born and came to life, with the entire People of God.

And this must be done without avarice and jealousy: “Freely you have received; freely it shall be given” (cf. *Mt* 10, 8).

Towards a “mysticism of the us”

Faced with this new awareness, God’s People have a simple question that requires discernment in order to respond: What is being asked of us? What paths are we to follow so that this conversion will be an effective one?

Pope Francis often repeated: it’s not a matter of simple cosmetic surgeries or simple rethinking of structures, although this is indispensable in many cases. It’s a question of conversion of heart and mind in order to penetrate the gaze of Jesus. In other words, a paradigm shift. This entails, first, a change of perspective on a spiritual level, a complete openness to the action of the Spirit of Jesus today.

It is an essential prerequisite for tackling other fronts. Pope Francis invites us to take a courageous step: one of openness and training on the part of every member God’s People to embrace an evangelical mysticism that is essentially a “mysticism of the us”: “Father, just as you are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us” (*Jn* 17, 21). This is both the source and the ongoing nourishment for the Council’s ecclesiology of communion. Prior to the Council, Y. Congar affirmed that the ‘hierarcheological’ concept of the Church corresponded to a spirituality of obedience as the path to union with God; today, however, an ecclesiology of the People of God entails a spirituality of communion with God Trinity, in the Trinity, and with our brothers and sisters.

This kind of self-awareness took time to mature, and it was John Paul II who began to articulate this in *Novo millennio ineunte*. Truthfully, however, we need to acknowledge that much remains to be done. The Christian mentality today, passed down and present in all spheres of ecclesial life, is still deeply individualistic. There is a dusting of communion, but not enough to ‘jeopardize’ the previous status quo.

In a decisive passage, Pope Francis’ example and teachings show themselves to be providential. Molded by the great spirituality of Ignatius of Loyola, he knows full well what is needed *today* in order to penetrate Jesus’ gaze. In order to bring about a “mysticism of the us” we clearly need to revisit the great currents of Christian mysticism that have blossomed through the centuries: because without a genuine, robust interior life, nothing can be achieved. However, we need to do this in the light of Jesus’ “May they all be one”. It is what Chiara Lubich, mystic and spiritual exponent of our times, taught us. We cannot leave aside her teaching: it incarnates a word which the Spirit is saying to today’s Church.

“God calls the Church to be a Synod”

Only through a humble, concrete, and practically unprecedented exercise of persevering in nurturing this “mysticism of the us”, that is both demanding and liberating, will we be able to

transform and guide the Church in her every aspect and expression towards a "synodal" style and framework.

This is one of the decisive directives of Pope Francis' magisterium, and the result of a gradual process of maturation within different contexts, that constitute the entire People of God (Synod of Bishops, local Churches, theological disciplines, associations, etc.).

I will limit my focus to three recent documents: Pope Francis' programmatic keynote address (among the most important of his pontificate) marking the 50th anniversary of the Synod of Bishops summoned by Paul VI; the in-depth study on *Synodality in life and mission of the Church*, published by the International Theological Commission, in which the significance of the synodal dimension as "constitutive dimension of the Church" is explained; and the Apostolic Constitution, *Episcopalis communio*, on reform of the Synod of Bishops, which, in addition to introducing new procedures, offers important insights regarding a synodal style for the whole Church.

The Spirit, therefore, is inviting members of the Church to "journey together", nurtured by communitarian discernment in the light of the Word of God: it is the main pathway which God, the Father, is indicating to the Church and schooling her, so that she may be an authentic and useful companion to all of humanity as it travels along the path of history.

The Gospel and the "culture of encounter"

A final, key part of Pope Francis's Magisterium is the "culture of encounter". It's not a simple sound-bite or slogan, but a practical indication of what, years prior, Paul VI intuited in *Ecclesiam Suam*: The name of 'mission' today is *dialogue* (cf. n. 66).

Evangelization clearly entails an explicit proclamation and witness to the Gospel of Jesus. But this Gospel is, above all, the Spirit who molds Church life and pushes her to "go forth" and become that dwelling where cultures can meet, in order for humanity to grow towards "full maturity of Christ". (cf *Eph* 4, 13).

And this is the point! If every culture is the historical representation of a people in the here and now, in a specific time and space; it is through their irrepressible uniqueness that they draw from the universal, because it expresses what is human, and therefore is open to multiple incarnations. The Gospel, by its nature, promotes what humans draw in gift from God in Christ, encountering one other in ways that are cherished and valued by each one.

The Gospel is the Breath of Life which breathes *within*, *beyond* and *among* cultures: it lives within them, pushes them beyond themselves, and establishes relationships between them. The Church's mission is to bring all cultures to encounter the Breath of the Gospel: becoming one with each culture, pushing each to transcend itself toward its full realization, and to establish a relationship among them. Wherever the Gospel is alive, it is possible for encounters between persons and the cultures to occur because it is the encounter with Jesus in his Spirit.

In this time of immense upheaval, humanity is called for the first time towards a universal encounter between cultures in which value is given to each one. It is a challenge and an opportunity for the Church to be herself by "going forth": to sow the seeds of the Gospel as yeast for the encounter between the cultures, for the coming of the Kingdom.

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In conclusion, and so that all that has been said above does not remain a mere yearning, we need to commit ourselves, decisively and with foresight, to the establishment of spaces and formation courses where the efficaciousness and incisiveness of these renewal processes can be experienced. And naturally, we need to start from the new generations. The greatest urgency for today's Church, alive in God for all humanity, is one of offering inundations of new thought and of new life.