

Pope Francis and the New Evangelization

A fresco by Giotto in the Basilica of St. Francis depicts the call of the Lord to “repair my Church” which the “poverello” received. They were difficult times for the faith and, therefore, for Christianity.

Éloi Leclerc, in his wonderful study of St. Francis, pointed him out as a new man for a new society. He says that he arrived at the very moment of de-Christianization and it was his intention to be that which would animate a “return to the Gospel”. “All this came about because he rediscovered the Gospel in the processes of the history of mankind”.

Today, as in the past with the Saint of Assisi, Pope Bergoglio meets good and well disposed people and risks speaking out clearly on those occasions when things have to be said and action has to be taken.

A GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT WHICH QUESTIONS US HERE TODAY, THE ORDER AND THE WHOLE CHURCH

The advent of “reason”, with the enlightenment, and of “production”, with the industrial revolution in the XVIII and XIX centuries, is the key to the vision through which society, in both East and West, increasingly considers humanity and the world.

I will now present some of these:

1. Features which characterize our ecclesial and global environment

1. The emergence of the individual as “the subject of his/her destiny and of history”: the person proclaimed his/her freedom to be prior to any other external authority (religion, tradition, authority...), and defined him/herself as an individual by rejecting all that could limit his/her conscience or freedom of self-determination. Gifted with reason and being free and autonomous, they have made themselves the subject and owner of their destiny.

2. A plural and multi-centered world: the present-day world is evermore characterized by “differentiation”. Although some “systems” are being globalized more and more, the system of “the free market” for example, an expansive process of cultural pluralism is, however, noted. Ethnic, regional, linguistic, etc., particularities are appearing even in societies which were characterized, until

recently, by a great homogeneity. We are witnessing the fragmentation of the cultural universe into a multitude of “vital spaces” which some call “new tribes”.

3. A process of secularization: present-day humanity, seeking to free itself of all external bonds and following a process of secularization that is affirming itself and spreading more and more throughout the world, is trying to free itself from authorities, such as the supernatural, religions, traditions, rites, etc., that have regulated human life during thousands of years.

4. A new international order: the evolution of the world in recent centuries has laid down the foundations of the so-called “globalization” of relationships. Interdependence is progressively growing on all levels in an ever more global “involvement”. The clearest example of this phenomenon is offered to us by the economy, whose power and influence in the most diverse areas of human life has changed it into a guide and basis of the process of interdependency which is presently taking place.

5. The crisis of the quality of life is brought about by an imbalance of what is important and by the affective and spiritual crisis to which the human person has been submitted. With regard to the first, the eagerness to possess things, which leads to the exploitation of natural resources, has culminated in the logic of “plunder” and generated an unsustainable development. The affective and spiritual emptiness of the person has reached such a point that it can be said that there is a real affective and spiritual crisis, caused by the displacement of the affective and spiritual dimension to a secondary level because of the priority granted to the productive process.

2. OUR ORDER, FACED BY THESE CHALLENGES, PRESENTS ITSELF AS AN EVANGELIZING FRATERNITY

I, on the basis of our charism that makes us an evangelizing fraternity, now wish to point out some points that, it seems to me, must be present in our evangelizing activity in today’s world.

I suggest, first of all, some imperatives which must always be taken into account, given that they stem from our charism. I will then enumerate a series of priorities which are worthy of our endeavors, attention and care, according to the urgencies and needs of different places and situations.

2.1. Some basic imperatives, which emerge as indispensable requirements of our evangelizing activity in today’s world, are:

a) To be Witnesses to God.

One of our characteristics, as consecrated men, has to be that of grasping the presence of God, listening to Him, contemplating Him, giving witness to Him through our life and announcing Him in words. The future will depend very much on our capacity to be witnesses to God, who is present in our complicated world, and on translating into life the experience we have had and acquire of Him in our following of the poor Jesus Christ in the footprints of St. Francis of Assisi. Situated in a world that is both terrible and beautiful, we have to live as men of God “with hearts lifted up to the Lord” (Eucharistic Liturgy).

It is important, therefore, to create places for experiences of God in our world and, at the same time, to unmask the “false gods” of our epoch. It is a prophetic and critical commitment. And, for this to be truly efficacious, we must, above all, yearn **“to have the Spirit of the Lord and His holy operation”** (Francis of Assisi, R 10, 8), the necessary condition for contemplating, in all its depth, the mystery shut up in the human being, in events, in history, in nature and in the measure that it leads to the living God.

b) Life in Fraternity:

Following Jesus Christ in Fraternity. This is precisely the place from which we insert ourselves into history and the Church. The fraternity has been the “great novelty” by which we have been able, during recent decades, to understand and express ever better the Franciscan vocation, overcoming every individualistic reading of it. Being Brothers living in and on the basis of Fraternity leads us to cultivate our form of life, giving it quality and depth. We are brothers, not simply companions; we do not live in a boarding house, but live together in a Fraternity where the constant learning to be Friars Minor is an integral part of our ongoing formation.

And we live this fraternity as **“Minors”** in the heart of the world, sharing its signs of life and death, especially those of the poorest. This insertion is a perennial memory of our itinerancy and presupposes the overcoming of every form of **“a greenhouse fraternity”** closed in on self. We, as a fraternity, are called to be **“a living Gospel”** and to bring a gaze of faith, hope and love to the heart of the world in which practical gestures precede words. In this way the fraternity will be, of itself, a living and credible witness to and a proclamation of the Gospel.

c) Commitment to the defense of life

In the face of the many signs of death which tend to suffocate and mutilate humanity in its profound identity and integrity, we take on the defense and promotion of life. We will discover the presence of personal and social sin, and the anti-evangelical roots which nest in the systems and structures of death. Faced by such situations, we feel called to a continuous personal and social conversion and to strive to bring about the necessary “changes” and integral “liberation”.

Many forms of violence are concentrated on human beings and the whole of creation. The defense of life begins with respect for the dignity of the human person and the safeguarding of creation. Here is found the basis of all further options. Without this respect there is no authentic human promotion, or real liberation, or option for the poor, or safeguarding of creation. Let us see the possibility for humanity and creation to be developed according to the plan of God in it.

2.2. Priorities

To speak of some objectives as priorities does not mean taking them up for a short time only or excluding others. They are pointed out as guides to the work of evangelizing that we, as Friars Minor, must carry out while taking the diversities of places and situations into account. I think these priorities are:

a) Enculturation:

By culture we mean that particular way in which men and women of a people cultivate their own relationships with nature, among themselves and with God (Cfr. GS 53, “...everything whereby man develops and perfects his many bodily and spiritual qualities”); keeping in mind that the recognition of “the other” in his own particular identity should not make us give up our own identity, our own interests, dreams or culture. Evangelization, therefore, can never be understood as the transplanting of a culture or of some cultural elements. No cultural model can capture the Gospel. As the II Vatican Council states, the Church, “in virtue of her mission and nature is bound to no particular form of human culture” (GS, 42). Paul VI writes: “The Gospel, and consequently evangelization, is certainly not identical with culture, and is independent with regard to all cultures” (Evangelii nuntiandi, 20).

Enculturation is, therefore, necessary. This presupposes, first of all, that the work of evangelization continues the incarnation of the proclamation of Jesus Christ in history and in different cultures. This is the central element!

Enculturation is an imperative for the entire evangelizing fraternity in its following of Jesus. It is not something optional or for a group. Our evangelical itinerancy involves a socio-cultural solidarity that must be manifested in a closeness that recognizes and respects otherness. Relationships must be based on reciprocity, dialogue, respect and mutual listening. This enculturation accepts otherness and has to be faithful to both the identity of the message of the Gospel and to the particular cultures, harmonizing with particular fruitfulness the unity of the faith and the diversity of its manifestations.

b) The Mission 'Ad Gentes':

When we speak of the 'ad gentes' evangelization we think, above all, of the explicit proclamation of Jesus Christ to those peoples or human groups who have never heard the joyful News, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, or who have lost their earlier vigor. In such cases we help in the establishment of a particular Church until it reaches solid maturity.

We endeavor to be always present as a missionary fraternity. The witness of a life in fraternity is, in itself, an evangelizing presence.

All Friars must generously cultivate this missionary awareness as an integrating part of our charisma. In effect, St. Francis, obedient to the word of Jesus: **"Go out to the whole world; proclaim the Gospel to all creation"**, (Mk 16,15) also says to the whole Order today: **"For this reason, He (the Son of God) has sent you into the whole world that you may bear witness to His voice in word and deed and bring everyone to know that there is no one who is all-powerful except Him"** (A Letter to the Entire Order, 9, the writings of St. Francis of Assisi).

c) The option for the poor

Our evangelization is directed, first of all, to people and reaches the systems and structures through them. The human beings who live in a specific society and in a concrete culture are important in this. We, therefore, evangelize the worker, not the work. We evangelize people, not their systems of government. The Friars Minor are evangelized in their fraternities, not the institutions of the Province or Order.

In this way, the theme of the poor springs from real people, although they are absorbed in relationships and systems that cause or reflect inhuman situations. Solidarity, which requires us to have respect for the other in his identity and in his differences with respect to us, drives us to share the condition of the other in the poor.

Following Jesus, poor, humble and host, let us adopt “the life and condition of the little ones in society, always living among them as minors” (GGCC 65), behaving in such a way that “no one is kept from us, particularly those who usually are socially and spiritually neglected” (GGCC 64-82). It is clearly a matter of sharing their life and of living “in this world as promoters of justice and as messengers and agents of peace” (Cfr. GGCC 68) “protecting the rights of the oppressed” (GGCC 69); and being “thoroughly convinced of the importance and seriousness of social problems” (GGCC 96), doing everything so that the rights and human dignity of all are respected and guaranteed “and the abuses harmful to human dignity are eradicated” (GGCC, 94).

d) Justice, peace and the safeguarding of creation

We also strongly feel the duty to collaborate actively and in a suitable way of life, work and word in the promotion of justice and peace. The same must be affirmed in respect to the safeguarding of creation, which appears today to be “a mortal wound”.

There is no doubt that St. Francis is a particularly effective witness to peace, justice and the safeguarding of creation lived as a gift from God in Christ and radiated in a convincing way. We cherish the profound vision that, in this spirit, underlines the fraternal relationships of all the beings of creation. The respect that St. Francis had for all creatures is well known. He tried to unite himself with all created beings in order to praise the Creator with them. And he did not do it from a generic and abstract view of things. According to him, all beings, animals and things, must be treated with courtesy by respecting their individuality, idiosyncrasies and their proper place in the harmony of creation.

In a world crucified by violence, wars, radical fundamentalisms, discords and divisions, we feel the urgency of the exhortation of St. Francis to be, evermore and in all parts, the makers of peace and instruments of reconciliation, beginning with those with whom we live and whom we serve: the Fraternity, the local and national community.

In an ongoing spirit of discernment and always guided by the criteria of the Gospel, let us try to collaborate with local movements and with the national and international organizations by promoting peace between all countries, ethnic groups, races, cultures and religions.

e) An ecumenical attitude and inter-religious dialogue

There is a great awareness of the need and urgency for ecumenical dialogue today. Important steps, which have led the Church to a more frank and open ecumenical dialogue, have been taken. Dialogue between religions, which presupposes knowing the richness of each one of them, has also been marked by this urgency.

St. Francis pushes people towards a convergence in diversity that is capable of keeping hope alive and the path that leads to communion open. When the Holy See wanted to remind the world of the urgency for interreligious dialogue, it did so by indicating a place: Assisi. Why Assisi? Exhorting the Franciscan family and all Catholics to incarnate and defend the “**spirit of Assisi**”, John Paul II explained the reason for this choice with the following words: “**I chose this city of Assisi as the place for our day of prayer for peace because it represents the Saint who is venerated here, St. Francis, known and respected by an infinity of people throughout the whole world as a symbol of peace, reconciliation and fraternity**” (October 27th, 1986)

The Franciscan tradition also invites us to pay particular attention to dialogue with our Muslim Brothers, especially in the places where the phenomenon of fundamentalism is growing in a disturbing way. The silent Franciscan presence in those countries is a sign of a path to dialogue that we want to keep open always.

2.3 Horizons which open up and expand

Many people complain and allow themselves to be overcome by pessimism in our days. But they who, with faith in the Lord of history try to accept and interpret the signs of death and the signs of resurrection, perceive that the moment in history that is ours to live is an opportunity, a favorable occasion that entails many riches, and they have a great desire for its realization and plenitude. It is a time of grace that the Lord has granted us to live.

The horizon is full of hope and it is being changed into an attitude of faith lived in solidarity. United in hope, let us go forward with confidence, finding, here and now, signs of life capable of animating and responding fruitfully to the new times and spaces. Our form of evangelical life contains the ideal basis for changing our fraternities into living cells, the ground of which fertilize the faith and hope through a solidarity without frontiers.

Our evangelizing activity must be nourished by this hope and solidarity so that they may be yeast, salt and light in the heart of humanity facing up to the challenges and urgencies of the present. In this way it will be able to point out suitable paths for giving witness and announcing the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

2.4. After the Example of Pope Francis

1. If I wish to speak of the Mission of Jesus in present-day Society, I could not base it on anything better than on the beautiful example of Pope Francis.

2. I think I must now refer to the captivating and charismatic model that Pope Francis has introduced into the Church. He is renewing the Church profoundly through his gestures, attitudes and speeches by which he is trying to enlighten minds, warming hearts and strengthening the will of all with the light and power of the Gospel in order to make us all determined witness, “missionary disciples of Christ”, sent into the world to serve the poorest and the marginalized and, in this way, transform our society without fear.

3. I do not believe that we, as a believing community, can remain indifferent to this desire or pretend it has nothing to do with us. I am convinced that the Holy Spirit is speaking to the Church through Pope Francis and is proposing a real “personal and pastoral conversion” to us and is encouraging us to carry out the new evangelization.

4. A priest was telling me that each of the attitudes and gestures of Pope Francis is an encyclical or, at least, a real homily on the rectitude of life, love of one’s neighbor, ecumenism, compassion, friendship, tenderness, sympathy for the sick, the new evangelization, good humor and joy.

5. The acts that we know are not simply news for journalists, who are giving great coverage to him, to all he does and, much more, to how he does it. Through his gestures, teaching role and his way of “governing”, he is communicating his vision of the Church to us. Everything about him speaks to us of Christ.

6. Let us follow the activity of the Pope each day. A lot may seem to us to be mere curious anecdotes. But they are not to give himself publicity. What the Holy Father is proposing to us in a simple manner each day are elements of a teaching role that is rich in the novelty of the Gospel! There is a new concept of Church here! There is a new way of thinking, including the way of governing in the Church, here! We have such a lot to learn!

7. The first thing we must point out as a challenge to us, in order to live the mission of Jesus and to give witness to our faith in Christ, is to be attentive to the concrete reality. Pope Francis has that style of life of being attentive to the concrete reality, but with a special pastoral sensitivity, seeking to contemplate God in all things and seeing all things through the eyes of God.

8. Our society does not know that when it distances itself most from God is when its needs Him most. In this way we can discover the need for salvation our society has and the urgency with which we must undertake the process of the transformation of our society in order for it to be more human and fraternal, in accordance with the plan of God. He is trying to achieve this by maintaining and building unity, without ignoring the dynamics that are proper to society itself.

9. A new way of being Church. We have seen, with the testimony of the Pope in his actions, that this is the kind of Church he feels called to construct:

- a Church at the service of this world by being faithful to Christ and His Gospel;
- a Church free from all mundane spirituality which leads to vanity, to arrogance and pride; which are elements proper to an idolatry.
- a Church free for the temptation to become frozen within its own institutional structures.
- a Church free from the risk of being concerned about itself, of becoming middle class, of closing in on self, of being a clerical Church.
- He asks for a Church that is truly the Body of the Incarnate Word and, like Him, is incarnated in reality and attentive to the poorest and those who suffer most;
- a Church that cannot be reduced to being a small chapel since it is called to become a home for the whole of humanity;
- we will live the mission of Jesus in our world if the Church is always addressed to those who are least, the marginalized, and develops this predilection without forgetting all the rest;
- we will live the mission of Jesus in our world of today if our Church feels comfortable on the frontiers, on the peripheries of society and does not seek its own stability, security and comfort bought through passivity and conspiratorial silence;
- living the mission of Jesus in our world of today does not mean that the Church must espouse all men and women of the world, nor does it mean that we must oblige them to become members of it.

- The Church of Pope Francis wishes to offer itself as an open space in which all of us can meet and recognize each other because there is space for dialogue, diversity and welcome in it.
- Living the mission of Jesus in our world of today does not imply that we must oblige the world to enter the Church; it must be a Church that receives the entire world as the world is, that is, is a place of salvation.
- To live the mission of Jesus in our present-day world is to fulfill the dream of the Pope, to convert ourselves into a Church that goes out onto the streets, onto the highways, to evangelize, to touch with its hands the hearts of people; a Church disposed to serve, that offers to reach out not only to the geographical peripheries, but to those existential ones where our brothers and sisters often struggle to survive;
- to live the mission of Jesus in our world of today we must be changed into a poor Church that opts preferentially for the poor and becomes their voice, that see the “wounds of Jesus” in the old, infirm and handicapped young people;
- society today asks us to live the mission of Jesus as a Church that endeavors to overcome the terrible culture of indifference in which we live and that leads the one who feels evermore abandoned, exploited and marginalized to violence; a Church which pays just attention and gives importance to women in both society and its own institutions.

10. The dimension of martyrdom in the faith

Speaking to the Bishops of Brazil (Archbishops House in Rio de Janeiro, 27.07.2013) the Pope said that the Church seems to have forgotten that there is nothing higher than Jerusalem, nothing stronger than the weakness of the cross, nothing more convincing than the goodness of love, of the rapid rhythm of pilgrims; the journey of the Church is not a marathon, but a pilgrimage.

We cannot forget that humility, the cross and persecution accompany and prove the true new evangelization. There are new martyrs, perhaps even more than in the early centuries. Being a Christian today means being a candidate for martyrdom.

It is necessary, therefore, to recover the pace of the people we must accompany in order to find the time to share with those with whom we walk, to be able to accompany them by cultivating patience and have the capacity to listen and an understanding of such different situations. There is no need to travel so quickly that it prevents us seeing what surrounds us.

Politics and culture ask us for an openness that makes sure no one feels rejected, accused, marginalized or condemned. Addressing the political and cultural leaders in Rio de Janeiro, the Pope wished to underline the importance of the culture of meeting together in order to promote a society that dares to open up spaces to all, does not exclude anyone or make “disposable material” of anyone.

If we wish to find the way to live the mission of Jesus today, we must promote a culture of meeting together that eliminates the social marginalization of youth, who have been often denied the possibility of employment, of a future, even of a meaningful participation in the Church, in the Parish (“It is necessary to cause rows”, the Pope says: 25.07.2013).

The new evangelization involves young people not only as targets of it but as its agents. The Pope, especially in his words to young people, therefore, invites them to risk their very lives, to apply their energies in the construction of the Church and a new society, to spend their lives for the sake of those things for which it is worthwhile to live, particularly for Jesus Christ and the service of the poorest, without allowing themselves to be robbed of their hope and joy, without giving in to the false promises of paradises of happiness.

11. A mission that sets out from imperfection, limitation and lack of resources

At times the Church does not have vitality; it doesn't have the vision and credibility to continue to attract men and women of our time, especially the new generations.

In just one year of his pontificate, Pope Francis has presented himself as a new breath of the Holy Spirit that is shaking the dust from the Church that is slimming down bureaucracy, that is succeeding in making the Church poorer, simpler and, above all, he is encouraging it to go out along the highways of the world to evangelize.

And we must do this despite the limitations of our means. In fact, as the Pope said to the Bishops of Brazil, the Church is not a “transatlantic liner”, but a small boat, a simple fishing boat. This means that God works through poor means. Success cannot depend on human efforts but on the power and creativity of God.

We now feel that the Church is a Mother full of tenderness and love, full of sweetness, full of humility, full of patience. And he has taught us this through his gestures, attitudes and personal decisions, through the way he deals with the world.

12. Conclusion

All this represents a magnificent example and a great stimulus to all if we wish to feel committed, in a Franciscan way, to the mission of Jesus in our world of today and if we wish to lead others to an encounter with the mystery of God, as the little man of Assisi did.

This has to happen through great experiences of love that open the heart and not only transmits ideas or knowledge about Him but lead us to Him. As in Bethlehem, As in the Porziuncola, As it was in the beginning.

FRANCIS, REPAIR MY CHURCH AGAIN

Today, as in the past, the Lord has again called Francis and has asked of him the very same thing he asked of him of Assisi. The fresco of Giotto clearly expresses how the Saint draws the man closer to one of the towers of St. John Lateran that is threatening to collapse. But, great words of thanksgiving to the Holy Spirit for having entrusted the Bark of Peter to a pastor who “smells of sheep” and who knows that the Gospel is a secure route to the future are heard often.

The “Year of Faith” and the task of the New Evangelization have spurred us on towards the construction of a New Society that requires the adhesion of disciples and enthusiastic missionaries to recover it for the Church and to strengthen its true identity.

Oscar Andrés Cardinal Rodríguez Maradiaga, S.D.B., O.F.M.
Archbishop of Tegucigalpa, Honduras