Apostolic Zeal: The Passion for Evangelization

Pope Francis' 2023 Wednesday Audiences



REGNUM CHRISTI

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“The community of disciples of Jesus was born apostolic and missionary. The Holy Spirit molds her outwardly — a Church which goes forth, which goes out — so that she is not closed in on herself but outgoing, a contagious witness of Jesus — faith is also contagious — reaching out to radiate his light to the ends of the earth.”

– POPE FRANCIS

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1. The Call to the Apostolate (Mt 9:9–13)

January 11, 2023

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Today we begin a new series of catecheses, dedicated to an urgent and decisive theme for Christian life: *the passion for evangelization*, that is, *apostolic zeal*. It is a vital dimension for the Church: the community of Jesus' disciples was in fact born apostolic, born missionary, not proselytizing. And from the start, we had to make this distinction: being missionary, being apostolic, evangelizing, is not the same as proselytizing. They have nothing to do with one another. It concerns a vital dimension for the Church. The community of disciples of Jesus was born apostolic and missionary. The Holy Spirit moulds her outwardly — a Church which goes forth, which goes out — so that she is not closed in on herself but outgoing, a contagious witness of Jesus — faith is also contagious — reaching out to radiate his light to the ends of the earth. It can happen, however, that the apostolic ardour, the desire to reach others with the good news of the Gospel, may diminish, become tepid. Sometimes it seems to be eclipsed; there are "closed-off" Christians, they don't think of others. But when Christian life loses sight of the horizon of evangelization, the horizon of proclamation, it grows sick: it closes in on itself, it becomes self-referential, it becomes atrophied. Without apostolic zeal, faith withers. Mission, on the other hand, is the oxygen of Christian life: it invigorates and purifies it. Let us embark, then, on a process of rediscovering the evangelizing passion, starting with the Scriptures and the Church's teaching, to draw apostolic zeal from its sources. Then we will approach some living sources, some witnesses who have rekindled the passion for the Gospel within the Church, so that they may help us rekindle the fire that the Holy Spirit wants to keep burning within us.

And today I would like to begin with a somewhat emblematic Gospel episode. We [just] heard it, the call of the Apostle Matthew. And he himself tells the story in his Gospel, which we have heard (cf. 9:9-13).

It all begins with Jesus, who, the text says, "saw a man". Few people saw Matthew as he was: they knew him as the one who was "sitting at the tax office" (v. 9). He was, in fact, a tax collector: that is, someone who collected taxes on behalf of the Roman empire that occupied Palestine. In other words, he was a collaborator, a traitor to the people. We can imagine the contempt the people felt for him: he was a "publican", as they were called. But in the eyes of Jesus, Matthew is a man, with both his miseries and his greatness. Be aware of this: Jesus does not stop at the adjective — Jesus always seeks out the noun. "This person is a sinner, he's that kind of person..." these are adjectives: Jesus goes to the person, to the heart, "This is a person, this is a man, this is a woman". Jesus goes to the essence, the noun, never the adjective. He leaves aside the adjectives. And while there is distance between Matthew and his people — because they see the adjective, "publican" — Jesus draws near to him, because *every man* is loved by God. "Even this wretch"? Yes, even this wretch. Indeed, the Gospel says he came for this very wretch: "I have come for sinners, not for the righteous". This *gaze* of Jesus that sees the other, whoever he may be as the recipient of love, is really beautiful and it is the beginning of evangelizing passion. Everything starts from this gaze, which we learn from Jesus.

We can ask ourselves: how do we look upon others? How often do we see their faults and not their needs; how often do we label people according to what they do or what they think! Even as Christians we say to ourselves: is he one of us or not? This is not the gaze of Jesus: He always looks at each person with mercy and indeed with predilection. And Christians are called to do as Christ did, looking, like him, especially at the so-called "distant ones". Indeed, Matthew's account of the call ends with Jesus saying, "I came not to

call the righteous, but sinners" (v. 13). And if any one of us considers themselves righteous, Jesus is far away. He draws near to our limitations, to our miseries, in order to heal us.

It all starts, then, with the gaze of Jesus. "He saw a man", Matthew. This is followed — second step — by a *movement*. First the gaze: Jesus saw. Then the second step, movement. Matthew was sitting at the tax office; Jesus said to him: "Follow me". And "he rose and followed him" (v. 9). We note that the text emphasizes that "he rose". Why is this detail so important? Because in those days he who was seated had authority over the others who stood before him to listen to him or, as in that case, to pay taxes. He who sat, in short, had power. The first thing Jesus does is to detach Matthew from power: from sitting to receive others, He sets him in motion towards others, not receiving, no: he goes out to others. He makes him leave a position of supremacy in order to put him on an equal footing with his brothers and sisters, and open to him *the horizons of service*. This is what he does, and this is fundamental for Christians. Do we, disciples of Jesus, we, Church, sit around waiting for people to come, or do we know how to get up, to set out with others, to seek others? Saying, "But let them come to me, I am here, let them come", is a non-Christian position. No, you go to seek them out, you take the first step.

A look — Jesus saw; a movement — "he rose"; and third, a *destination*. After getting up and following Jesus, where will Matthew go? We might imagine that, having changed the man's life, the Master would lead him to new encounters, new spiritual experiences. No, or at least not immediately. First, Jesus goes to his home; there Matthew prepares "a great feast" for him, in which "a large crowd of tax collectors" — that is, people like him — takes part (cf. Lk 5:20). Matthew returns to his environment, but he returns there changed and with Jesus. His apostolic zeal does not begin in a new, pure place, an ideal place, far away, but instead he begins there where he lives, with the people he knows. Here is the message for us: we do not have to wait

until we are perfect and have come a long way following Jesus to bear witness to him, no. Our proclamation begins today, there where we live. And it does not begin by trying to convince others, not to convince: but by bearing witness every day to the beauty of the Love that has looked upon us and lifted us up. And it is this beauty, communicating this beauty, that will convince people — not communicating ourselves but the Lord himself. We are the ones who proclaim the Lord. We do not proclaim ourselves, we do not proclaim a political party, an ideology. No: we proclaim Jesus. We need to put Jesus in contact with the people, without convincing them but allowing the Lord to do the convincing. For as Pope Benedict taught us, "The Church does not engage in proselytism. Instead, she grows by 'attraction'" (*Homily at the Mass for the Inauguration of the Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean*, Aparecida, 13 May 2007). Do not forget this: when you see Christians proselytizing, making a list of people to come... these are not Christians; they are pagans disguised as Christians, but the heart is pagan. The Church grows not by proselytism, it grows by attraction.

I remember once, in a hospital in Buenos Aires, the women religious who worked there left because they were too few, and they couldn't run the hospital. And a community of sisters from Korea came. And they arrived, let's say on a Monday for example (I don't remember the day). They took possession of the sisters' house in the hospital and on Tuesday they came down to visit the sick in the hospital, but they didn't speak a word of Spanish. They only spoke Korean and the patients were happy, because they commented: "Well done! These nuns, bravo, bravo"! "But what did the sister say to you"? "Nothing, but with her gaze she spoke to me, they communicated Jesus". Not to communicate ourselves but communicating Jesus, with a gaze, with gestures. This is attraction, the opposite of proselytism.

This attractive witness, this joyful witness is the goal to which Jesus leads us with his loving gaze and with the outgoing movement that his Spirit raises up in our hearts. And we can consider whether our gaze resembles that of Jesus, to attract the people, to bring them closer to the Church. Let us think about that.

2. Jesus, Model of Evangelization

January 18, 2023

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Last Wednesday we began a series of catechesis on the passion of evangelization, that is, on the apostolic zeal that should enliven the Church and every Christian. Today, let us look at the unsurpassable model of proclaiming: *Jesus*. The Christmas Day Gospel defined him as the "Word of God" (cf. Jn 1:1). The fact that he is the *Logos*, that is, the Word, highlights an essential aspect of Jesus: He is always in relation, outgoing, never isolated, always in relation, outgoing. The word, in fact, exists to be transmitted, communicated. So it is with Jesus, the Eternal Word of the Father, reaching out to us, communicated to us. Christ not only has words of life, but makes his life a Word, a message: that is, he lives always turned toward the Father and toward us. Always looking at his Father who sent him and looking at us to whom he was sent.

Indeed, if we look at his days, described in the Gospels, we see that intimacy with the Father — prayer — occupies first place. This is why Jesus gets up early, when it is still dark, and goes into deserted areas to pray (cf. Mk 1:35; Lk 4:42), to speak with the Father. He makes all of his decisions and most important choices after having prayed (cf. Lk 6:12; 9:18). It is precisely within this relationship, in the prayer which connects him to the Father in the Spirit, that Jesus discovers the meaning of his being human, of his existence in the world, because he is on a mission for us, sent by the Father to us.

It is thus interesting to note the first public act that he accomplishes after the years of his hidden life in Nazareth. Jesus does not work a great wonder, he does not send an impactful message, but he mingles with the people who

were going to be baptized by John. In this way, he offers us the key by which he acts in the world: spending himself for sinners, putting himself in solidarity with us without distance, in a total sharing of life. In fact, speaking about his mission, he will say that he did not come "to be served but to serve, and to give his life" (Mk 10:45). Every day after praying, Jesus dedicates his entire day to the proclamation of the Kingdom of God and dedicates it to people, above all to the poorest and weakest, to sinners and to the sick (cf. Mk 1:32-39). That is, Jesus is in contact with the Father in prayer and then he is in contact with all the people through his mission, through catechesis, to teach the path of the Kingdom of God.

Now, should we want to represent his style of life with an image, it would not be difficult for us to find it: Jesus himself offers it to us. We have heard him, speaking of himself as the *Good Shepherd*, the one who, he says, "lays down his life for the sheep" (Jn 10:11). This is Jesus. In reality, being a shepherd was not just a job that required time and a lot of dedication; it was a true and proper way of life: 24 hours a day, living with the flock, accompanying it to pasture, sleeping among the sheep, taking care of those who were weakest. In other words, Jesus does not do something for us, but he gives everything. He gives his life for us. He has a *pastoral heart* (cf. Ez 34:15). He is a shepherd for all of us.

Indeed, to sum up the action of the Church in one word, precisely the term "pastoral" is often used. And to evaluate our pastoral work we need to confront ourselves with the model, confront ourselves with Jesus, Jesus the Good Shepherd. Above all, we can ask ourselves: do we imitate him, drinking from the wells of prayer so that our heart might be in harmony with his? Intimacy with him is, as a beautiful volume by Abbot Chautard suggested, *the soul of every apostolate*. Jesus himself clearly said it to his disciples: "Apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5). If we stay with Jesus, we discover that his pastoral heart always

beats for the person who is confused, lost, far away. And ours? How many times do we express our attitude toward people who are a bit difficult or with whom we have a bit of difficulty: "But it's their problem, let them work it out…". But Jesus never said this, never. Instead, he always went to meet all the marginalized, the sinners. He was accused of this — of being with sinners — because he brought God's salvation precisely to them.

We have heard the parable of the lost sheep, found in chapter 15 of the Gospel of Luke (cf. vv. 4-7). Jesus also speaks about the lost coin and about the prodigal son. If we want to train our apostolic zeal, we should always have chapter 15 of Luke before our eyes. Read it often. There we can understand what apostolic zeal is. There we discover that God does not remain contemplating the sheep pen, nor does he threaten them so they won't leave. Rather, if one leaves and gets lost, he does not abandon it but goes in search of it. He does not say, "It left. That's its fault. That's its business!" His pastoral heart reacts in another way: the pastoral heart *suffers* and the pastoral heart *takes risks*. It *suffers*: yes, God suffers for those who leave and, while he mourns over them, he loves them even more. The Lord suffers when we distance ourselves from his heart. He suffers for all who do not know the beauty of his love and the warmth of his embrace. But, in response to this suffering, he does not withdraw; rather, he *takes a risk*. He leaves the 99 sheep who are safe and ventures out for the lost one, thus doing something both risky and unreasonable, but consonant with his pastoral heart which misses the one who left. The longing for those who have left is constant in Jesus. And when we hear that someone has left the Church, what do we want to say? "Let them work it out". No. Jesus teaches us nostalgia for those who have left. Jesus does not feel anger or resentment but pure longing for us. Jesus feels nostalgic for us and this is God's zeal.

And I wonder, do we have similar sentiments? Perhaps we see those who have left the flock as adversaries

or enemies. “And this person?” “No, they’ve gone to the other side, they’ve lost the faith, they’re going to hell…”, and we are serene. When we meet them at school, at work, on the streets of the city, why don’t we think instead that we have a beautiful opportunity to witness to them the joy of a Father who loves them and has never forgotten them? Not to proselytize, no! But that the Word of the Father might reach them so we can walk together. To evangelize is not to proselytize. To proselytize is something pagan; it is neither religious nor evangelical. There is a good word for those who have left the flock and we have the honour and the burden of being the ones to speak that word. Because the Word, Jesus, asks this of us: to always draw near to everyone, with an open heart, because he is like that. Perhaps we have been following and loving Jesus for some time and have never wondered if we share his feelings, if *we suffer* and *we take risks* in harmony with Jesus’s heart, with this pastoral heart, close to Jesus’s pastoral heart! This is not about proselytism, as I said, so that others become “one of us”. No, this is not Christian. It is about loving so that they might be happy children of God. In prayer, let us ask for the grace of a pastoral heart, an open heart that draws near to everyone, so as to bear the Lord’s message as well as to feel Christ’s longing for each of them. For without this love that suffers and takes risks, our life does not work. If we Christians do not have this love that suffers and takes risks, we risk pasturing only ourselves. Shepherds who are shepherds of themselves, instead of being shepherds of the flock, are people who comb “exquisite” sheep. We do not need to be shepherds of ourselves, but shepherds for everyone.

3. Jesus, Teacher of Proclamation

January 25, 2023

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Last Wednesday we reflected on Jesus model of proclamation, on his pastoral heart always reaching out to others. Today we look to Him as a teacher of proclamation. Model of proclamation. Today, the teacher of proclamation let us be guided by the episode in which He preaches in the synagogue of His village, Nazareth. Jesus reads a passage from the prophet Isaiah (cf. 61:1-2) and then surprises everyone with a very short "sermon" of just one sentence, just one sentence. And He speaks thus, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Lk. 4:21). This was Jesus' sermon: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing". This means that for Jesus that prophetic passage contains the essence of what He wants to say about Himself. So, whenever we talk about Jesus, we should go back to that first announcement of His. Let us see, then, what this first announcement consists of. Five essential elements can be identified.

The first element is joy. Jesus proclaims, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me; [...] He has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor" (v. 18), that is, a proclamation of gladness, of joy. Good news: one cannot speak of Jesus without joy, because faith is a wonderful love story to be shared. Bearing witness to Jesus, doing something for others in His name, is like saying "between the lines" of one's life, that one has received so beautiful a gift that no words suffice to express it. Instead, when joy is lacking, the Gospel does not come through, because – as the word themselves suggests, it's the very meaning of the word – is good news, and "Gospel" means "good news," a proclamation of joy. A sad Christian can talk about beautiful things, but it is all in vain if the news

he conveys is not joyful. A thinker once said, "A Christian who is sad is a sad Christian." Don't forget this.

We come to the second aspect: deliverance. Jesus says He was sent "to proclaim release to the captives" (ibid.). This means that one who proclaims God cannot proselytize, no, cannot pressure others, no, but relieve them: not impose burdens, but take them away; bearing peace, not bearing guilt. Of course, following Jesus involves asceticism, involves sacrifices; after all, if every good thing requires these things, how much more the decisive reality of life! However, those who witness to Christ show the beauty of the goal rather than the toil of the journey. We may have happened to tell someone about a beautiful trip we took: for example, we would have spoken about the beauty of the places, what we saw and experienced, not about the time to get there and the queues at the airport, no! So, any announcement worthy of the Redeemer must communicate liberation. Like that of Jesus. Today there is joy, because I have come to liberate.

The third aspect: light. Jesus says He came to bring "sight to the blind" (ibid.). It is striking that throughout the Bible, before Christ, the healing of a blind man never appears, never. It was indeed a promised sign that would come with the Messiah. But here it is not just about physical sight, but a light that makes one see life in a new way. There is a "coming into the light," a rebirth that happens only with Jesus. If we think about it, that is how Christian life began for us: with Baptism, which in ancient times was called precisely "enlightenment." And what light does Jesus give us? He brings us the light of sonship: He is the beloved Son of the Father, living forever; with Him we too are children of God loved forever, despite our mistakes and faults. So life is no longer a blind advance toward nothingness, no; it is not a matter of fate or luck, no. It is not something that depends on chance or the stars, no, or even on health or finances, no. Life depends on love, on the love of the Father, Who cares for us, His beloved children. How wonderful to share

this light with others! Has it occurred to you that the life of each of us – my life, your life, our life – is an act of love? And an invitation to love? This is wonderful! But so many times we forget this, in the face of difficulties, in the face of bad news, even in the face of – and this is bad – worldliness, the worldly way of life.

The fourth aspect of the proclamation: healing. Jesus says He came "to set at liberty those who are oppressed" (ibid.). The oppressed are those who feel crushed by something that happens: sickness, labors, burdens on the heart, guilt, mistakes, vices, sins... Oppressed by this. Let us think of the sense of guilt, for example. How many of us have suffered this? We think a little bit about the sense of guilt for this or that.... What is oppressing us above all is precisely that evil that no medicine or human remedy can heal: sin. And if someone has a sense of guilt for something they have done, and that feels bad.... But the good news is that with Jesus, this ancient evil, sin, which seems invincible, no longer has the last word.

I can sin because I am weak. Each of us can do it, but that is not the last word. The last word is Jesus' outstretched hand that lifts you up from sin. "And Father, when does he do this? Once?" No. "Twice?" No. "Three times?" No. Always. Whenever you are sick, the Lord always has His hand outstretched. Only He wants us (to) hold on and let Him carry you. The good news is that with Jesus this ancient evil no longer has the last word: the last word is Jesus' outstretched hand that carries you forward. Jesus heals us from sin, always. And how much do I have to pay for this healing? Nothing. He heals us always and gratuitously.He invites those who "labour and are heavy laden" —— He says it in the Gospel – He invites them to come to Him (cf. Mt 11:28). And so to accompany someone to an encounter with Jesus is to bring them to the doctor of the heart, Who lifts up life. That is to say, "Brother, sister, I don't have answers to so many of your problems, but Jesus knows you, Jesus loves you and can heal and soothe your heart. Go and leave them with Jesus."

Those who carry burdens need a caress for the past/ carezza sul passato. So many times we hear, “But I would need to heal my past...I need a caress for that past that weighs so heavily on me...” He needs forgiveness. And those who believe in Jesus have just that to give to others: the power of forgiveness, which frees the soul from all debt. Brothers, sisters, do not forget: God forgets everything. How so? Yes, He forgets all our sins. That He forgets. That’s why He has no memory. God forgives everything because He forgets our sins. We only have to draw near to the Lord and He forgives us everything. Only He wants us to draw near to the Lord and He forgives us everything. Think of something from the Gospel, from the one who began to speak, “Lord I have sinned!” That son... And the father puts his hand in his mouth. “No, it’s okay, it’s nothing...” He doesn’t let him finish... And that’s good. Jesus is waiting for us to forgive us, to restore us. And how often? Once? Twice? No. Always. “But Father, I do the same things always...” And He will always do His same thing! Forgiving you, embracing you. Please, let us not distrust this. This is the way to love the Lord. Those who carry burdens and need a caress for the past need forgiveness, and Jesus does that. And that’s what Jesus gives: to free the soul from all debt. In the Bible it talks about a year when one was freed from the burden of debt: the Jubilee, the year of grace. As if it were the ultimate point of the proclamation.

In fact, Jesus says he came “to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord” (Luke 4:19). It was not a scheduled jubilee, like the ones we have now, where everything is planned and you think about how to do it and how not to do it. No. But with Christ the grace that makes life new always arrives and amazes. Christ is the Jubilee of every day, every hour, drawing you near, to caress you, to forgive you. And the proclamation of Jesus must always bring the amazement of grace. This amazement... “No, I can’t believe it! I have been forgiven.” But this is how great our God is. Because it is not we who do great things, but rather the grace of the Lord who, even through us, accomplishes unexpected things.

And these are the surprises of God. God is the master of surprises. He always surprises us, is always waiting, waits for us. We arrive, and He has been expecting us. Always. The Gospel comes with a sense of wonder and newness that has a name: Jesus.

May He help us to proclaim it as He desires, communicating joy, deliverance, light, healing, and wonder. This is how one communicates about Jesus.

The last thing: This good news, which the Gospel says is addressed "to the poor" (v. 18). We often forget about them, yet they are the recipients explicitly mentioned, because they are God's beloved. Let us remember them, and let us remember that, in order to welcome the Lord, each of us must make him— or herself "poor within." It's not sufficient like this, no: [you have to be] "poor within." With that poverty that makes one say... "Lord, I am in need, I am in need of forgiveness, I am in need of help, I am in need of strength. This poverty that we all have: making oneself poor interiorly. You have to overcome any pretense of self-sufficiency in order to understand oneself to be in need of grace, and to always be in need of Him. If someone tells me, "Father, what is the shortest way to encounter Jesus?" Be needy. Be needy for grace, needy for forgiveness, be needy for joy. And He will draw near to you. Thank you.

4. The First Apostolate

February 15, 2023

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

We continue our catechesis; the theme we have chosen is "The passion of evangelizing, apostolic zeal". Because evangelizing is not saying, 'Look, blah, blah, blah', and nothing more. There is a passion that involves everything: the mind, the heart, the hands, going out... everything, the whole person is involved with this proclamation of the Gospel, and for this reason we talk about *the passion for evangelizing*. After having seen in Jesus the model and the teacher of proclamation, we turn today to the first disciples, to what the disciples did. The Gospel says that Jesus "appointed twelve, to be with Him, and to be sent out to preach" (Mk 3:14); two things: to be with him and to send them to preach. There is one aspect that seems contradictory: He called them to be with him and to go and preach. One would say: either one or the other, either stay or go. But no: for Jesus there is no going without staying and there is no staying without going. It is not easy to understand this, but that's the way it is. Let us try to understand a little bit what is the sense in which Jesus says these things.

First of all, *there is no going without staying*: before sending the disciples forth on mission, Christ — the Gospel says — "calls them to himself" (cf. Mt 10:1). The proclamation is born from the encounter with the Lord; every Christian activity, especially the mission, begins from there. Not from what is learnt in an academy. No, no! It begins from the encounter with the Lord. Witnessing him, in fact, means radiating him; but, if we do not receive his light, we will be extinguished; if we do not spend time with him, we will bear ourselves instead of him — I am bringing myself and not him — and it will all be in vain. So only those who remain with him can bring the Gospel of Jesus. Anyone who

does not remain with him cannot bear the Gospel. He will bring ideas, but not the Gospel. Equally, however, *there is no staying without going*. In fact, following Christ is not an inward-looking fact: without proclamation, without service, without mission, the relationship with Jesus does not grow. We note that in the Gospel the Lord sends the disciples before having completed their preparation: shortly after having called them, he is already sending them! This means that the experience of mission is part of Christian formation. Let us then recall these two constitutive moments for every disciple: staying with Jesus and going forth, sent by Jesus.

Having called the disciples to himself and before sending them, Christ addresses a discourse to them, known as the 'missionary discourse' — this is what it is called in the Gospel. It is found in chapter 10 of Matthew's Gospel and it is like *the 'constitution' of the proclamation*. From that discourse, which I recommend you read today — it is only one page in the Gospel — I draw out three aspects: *why* proclaim, *what* to proclaim and *how* to proclaim.

Why proclaim: The motivation lies in a few words of Jesus, which it is good for us to remember: "Freely you have received, freely give" (v. 8). They are just a few words. But why proclaim? Because I have received freely, and I should give freely. The proclamation does not begin from us, but from the beauty of what we have received for free, without merit: meeting Jesus, knowing him, discovering that we are loved and saved. It is such a great gift that we cannot keep it to ourselves, we feel the need to spread it; but in the same style, right? That is, in gratuitousness. In other words: we have a gift, so we are called to make a gift of ourselves; we have received a gift and our vocation is to make a gift of ourselves to others; there is in us the joy of being children of God, it must be shared with our brothers and sisters who do not yet know it! This is the reason for the proclamation. Going forth and bringing the joy of what we have received.

Second: *What* , then, to proclaim. Jesus says: "Preach as you go, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand'" (v. 7). This is what must be said, first and foremost: God is near. So, never forget this: God has always been close to the people. He said it to the people himself: He said, "Look, what God is as close to the nations as I am to you?" This closeness is one of the most important things about God. There are three important things: closeness, mercy, and tenderness. Don't forget that. Who is God? The One Who is Close, the One Who is Tender, the One Who is Merciful. This is the reality of God. In preaching, we often urge people to do something, and that is fine; but let's not forget that the main message is that he is near: closeness, mercy, and tenderness. Accepting God's love is more difficult because we always want to be in the centre, we want to be protagonists, we are more inclined to do than to let ourselves be moulded, to speak than to listen. But, if what we do comes first, we will still be the protagonists. Instead, the proclamation must give primacy to God: to give the primacy to God, the first place to God, and to give to others the opportunity to welcome him, to realise that he is near. And me in the background.

The third point: *how* to proclaim. This is the aspect Jesus dwells on most: how to proclaim, what is the method, what should be the language for proclaiming. It's significant: He tells us that the manner, the style is essential in witnessing. Witnessing does not just involve the mind and saying something, the concepts. No. It involves everything, mind, heart, hands, everything, the three languages of the person: the language of thought, the language of affection, and the language of work. The three languages. One cannot evangelise only with the mind or only with the heart or only with the hands. Everything is involved. And, in style, the important thing is testimony, as Jesus wants us to do. He says this: "I send you out as sheep among wolves" (v. 16). He does not ask us to be able to face the wolves, that is, to be able to argue, to offer counter arguments, and to defend ourselves. No, no. We might think like this: let us become relevant, numerous, prestigious, and the world will

listen to us and respect us and we will defeat the wolves. No, it's not like that. No, I send you out as sheep, as lambs. This is important. If you don't want to be sheep, the Lord will not defend you from the wolves. Deal with it as best you can. But if you are sheep, rest assured that the Lord will defend you from the wolves. Be humble. He asks us to be like this, to be meek and with the will to be innocent, to be disposed to sacrifice; this is what the lamb represents: meekness, innocence, dedication, tenderness. And he, the Shepherd, will recognise his lambs and protect them from the wolves. On the other hand, lambs disguised as wolves are unmasked and torn to pieces. A Church Father wrote: "As long as we are lambs, we will conquer, and even if we are surrounded by many wolves, we will overcome them. But if we become wolves — 'Ah, how clever, look, I feel good about myself' — we will be defeated, because we will be deprived of the shepherd's help. He does not shepherd wolves, but lambs" (St John Chrysostom, *Homily 33 on the Gospel of Matthew*). If I want to be the Lord's, I have to allow him to be my shepherd; and he is not the shepherd of wolves, He is the shepherd of lambs, meek, humble, kind as the Lord is.

Still on the subject of *how* to proclaim, it is striking that Jesus, instead of prescribing what to bring on a mission, says what not to bring. At times, one sees some apostles, some person who relocates, some Christian that says he is an apostle and has given his life to the Lord, and he is carrying a lot of luggage. But this is not of the Lord. The Lord makes you lighten your load. "Take no gold, nor silver, nor copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor a staff" (vv. 9-10). Don't take anything. He says not to lean on material certainties, but to go into the world without worldliness. That is to say, I am going into the world, not with the style of the world, not with the world's values, not with worldliness — for the Church falling into worldliness is the worst thing that can happen. I go forth with simplicity. This is how one should proclaim: by showing Jesus rather than talking about Jesus. And how do we show Jesus? With our witness. And finally, by going together, in

community: the Lord sends all the disciples, but no one goes alone. The apostolic Church is completely missionary and in the mission it finds its unity. So: going forth, meek and good as lambs, without worldliness, and going together. Here is the key to proclamation, this is the key to success in evangelization. Let us accept these invitations from Jesus. Let his words be our point of reference.

5. The Protagonist of the Proclamation: the Holy Spirit

February 22, 2023

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning and welcome!

In our catechetical itinerary on the passion for evangelizing, today we start from the words of Jesus that we have heard: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Mt 28:19). "Go ", says the Risen One, not to indoctrinate, not to make proselytes, no, but *to make disciples*, that is, to give everyone the opportunity to come into contact with Jesus, to know and love Him freely. Go and *baptise*: to baptise means to immerse; and therefore, before indicating a liturgical action, it expresses a vital action: to immerse one's life in the Father, in the Son, in the Holy Spirit; to experience every day the joy of the presence of God who is close to us as Father, as Brother, as Spirit acting in us, in our very spirit. To baptise is to immerse oneself in the Trinity.

When Jesus says to His disciples—and also to us —"Go!", He is not just communicating a word. No. He simultaneously communicates *the Holy Spirit*, because it is only thanks to Him, thanks to the Holy Spirit, that one can receive Christ's mission and carry it out (cf. Jn 20:21-22). The Apostles, in fact, out of fear, remain closed up in the Upper Room until the day of Pentecost arrives and the Holy Spirit descends upon them (cf. Acts 2:1-13). And in that moment the fear leaves them, and, with His power, those fishermen, mostly unlettered, will change the world. "But if they can't speak...". But it is the word of the Spirit, the strength of the Spirit that bears them onward to change the world. The proclamation of the Gospel, therefore, is only realized in the power of the Spirit, who precedes the missionaries and prepares hearts: He is "the engine of evangelisation".

We discover this in the Acts of the Apostles, where on every page we see that *the protagonist of the proclamation* is not Peter, Paul, Stephen, or Philip, but is *the Holy Spirit*. In the Book of Acts, too, a crucial moment in the beginning of the Church is recounted, which can also say a lot to us. Then, as now, tribulations were not lacking among consolations — beautiful moments and not so beautiful moments — joys were accompanied by worries, both things. One [worry] in particular: how to deal with the pagans who came to the faith, with those who did not belong to the Jewish people, for example. Were they or were they not bound to observe the prescriptions of the Mosaic Law? This was no small matter for those people. Two groups were thus formed, between those who considered the observance of the Law indispensable and those who did not. In order to discern, the Apostles gathered in what came to be called the 'Council of Jerusalem', the first in history. How to resolve the dilemma? They might have sought a good compromise between tradition and innovation: some rules are observed, and others are left aside. Yet the Apostles do not follow this human wisdom to seek a diplomatic balance between the one and the other; they don't follow this, but they adapt to the work of the Spirit, who had anticipated them by descending upon the pagans as He had upon them.

And so, removing almost every obligation related to the Law, they communicate the final decisions, made — and this is what they write — by the Holy Spirit and by us (cf. Acts 15:28), this went out, "the Holy Spirit with us" — the Apostles always act in this way. Together, without being divided, despite having different sensitivities and opinions, they listen to the Spirit. And He teaches one thing, which is also valid today: every religious tradition is useful if it facilitates the encounter with Jesus. Every religious tradition is useful if it facilitates the encounter with Jesus. We could say that the historic decision of the first Council, from which we also benefit, was motivated by a principle, *the principle of proclamation*: everything in the Church must be conformed to the requirements of the proclamation of

the Gospel; not to the opinions of the conservatives or the progressives, but to the fact that Jesus reaches people's lives. Therefore, every choice, every usage, every structure, and every tradition is to be evaluated on the basis of whether they favour the proclamation of Christ. When decisions are found in the Church — for example ideological divisions: "I am conservative because..." "I am progressive because...". But where is the Holy Spirit? Be careful, for the Gospel is not an idea; the Gospel is not an ideology. The Gospel is a proclamation that touches the heart and makes you change your heart, but if you take refuge in an idea, in an ideology, whether right or left or centre, you are making the Gospel a political party, an ideology, a club of people. The Gospel always gives you this freedom of the Spirit that acts within you and carries you forward. And how necessary it is today that we take hold of the freedom of the Gospel and allow ourselves to be carried forward by the Spirit.

In this way the Spirit sheds light on the path of the Church, always. In fact, He is not only the light of hearts; He is the light that orients the Church: He brings clarity, helps to distinguish, helps to discern. This is why it is necessary to invoke Him often; let us also do so today, at the beginning of Lent. Because, as Church, we can have well-defined times and spaces, well-organised communities, institutes and movements, but without the Spirit, everything remains soulless. The organization is not enough; it is the Spirit that gives life to the Church. The Church, if she does not pray to Him and invoke Him, she closes in on herself, in sterile and exhausting debates, in wearisome polarisations, while the flame of the mission is extinguished. It is very sad to see the Church as if she were nothing more than a parliament. No. The Church is something else. The Church is the community of men and women who believe and proclaim Jesus Christ, but moved by the Holy Spirit, not by their own reason. Yes, you use your reason, but the Spirit comes to enlighten and move it. The Spirit makes us go forth, propels us to proclaim the faith in order to confirm ourselves in the faith, pushes us to go on mission to rediscover who we are. That is why

the Apostle Paul recommends: “Do not quench the Spirit” (1 Thess 5:19). Do not quench the Spirit. Let us pray to the Spirit often, let us invoke him, let us ask him every day to kindle his light in us. Let us do this before each encounter, to become apostles of Jesus with the people we find. Don’t quench the Spirit, either in the Christian communities or in each one of us.

Dear brothers and sisters, let us start, and start anew, as Church, from the Holy Spirit. “It is undoubtedly important that in our pastoral planning we start from sociological surveys, analyses, the list of difficulties, the list of expectations and even complaints. However, it is far more important to start from the *experiences of the Spirit*: that is the real departure. And it is therefore necessary to seek them out, list them, study them, interpret them. It is a fundamental principle that, in the spiritual life, is called the *primacy of consolation over desolation*. First there is the Spirit who consoles, revives, enlightens, moves; then there will also be desolation, suffering, darkness, but the principle for adjusting in the darkness is the *light of the Spirit*” (C. M. Martini, *Evangelising in the Consolation of the Spirit*, 25 September 1997). This is the principle to guide ourselves in things we do not understand, in confusions, even in so much darkness — it is important. Let us try to ask ourselves if we open ourselves up to this light, if we give it space: do I invoke the Spirit? Each of us can answer within ourselves. How many of us pray to the Spirit? “No, Father, I pray to Our Lady, I pray to the Saints, I pray to Jesus, but sometimes I pray the Our Father, I pray to the Father…”. “And the Holy Spirit? Don’t you pray to the Holy Spirit, who is the one who moves your heart, who carries you forth, who brings you consolation, who brings you the desire to evangelize, undertake mission?”. I leave you with this question: Do I pray to the Holy Spirit? Do I let myself be guided by Him, who invites me not to close in on myself but to bear Jesus, to bear witness to the primacy of God’s consolation over the desolation of the world? May our Lady, who has understood this well, help us to understand it.

6. The Second Vatican Council. 1. Evangelization as Ecclesial Service

March 8, 2023

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

In the last catechesis we saw how the first "council" in the history of the Church — a council, like that of Vatican II — the first council, was convened in Jerusalem over a matter linked to evangelization, namely the proclamation of the Good News to non-Jews — it was believed that the Gospel was only to be proclaimed to Jews. In the 20th century, the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council presented the Church as the pilgrim People of God through time, and *missionary by her very nature* (cf. Decree *Ad Gentes*, 2). What does this mean? There is a kind of bridge between the first and last Council, under the banner of evangelization, a bridge whose architect is the Holy Spirit. Today we listen to Vatican Council II to discover that evangelizing is always an *ecclesial service*, never solitary, never isolated, never individualistic. Evangelization is always carried out *in ecclesia*, that is, in a community, and without proselytism, because that is not evangelization.

Indeed, the evangelizer always transmits what he or she has received. Saint Paul was the first to write this: the gospel that he announced and that the communities received, and in which they remained steadfast, is the same one that the Apostle had in turn received (cf. 1 Cor 15:1-3). Faith is received and transmitted. This ecclesial dynamism of the transmission of the Message is binding and guarantees the authenticity of Christian proclamation. The same Paul writes to the Galatians: "Even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed" (1:8). This is beautiful, and this is good for many fashionable views...

The ecclesial dimension of evangelization constitutes, however, a criterion for confirmation of apostolic zeal. A necessary confirmation, because the temptation to proceed "alone" is always lurking, especially when the path becomes arduous and we feel the burden of the commitment. Equally dangerous is the temptation to follow easier pseudo-ecclesial paths, to adopt the worldly logic of numbers and polls, to rely on the strength of our ideas, programmes, structures, "relationships that count". This will not do; this should help a little, but the fundamental thing is the strength that the Spirit gives you to proclaim the truth of Jesus Christ, to proclaim the Gospel. The other things are secondary.

Now, brothers and sisters, let us place ourselves more directly in the school of the Second Vatican Council, rereading some passages of the Decree *Ad Gentes* (AG), the document on the Church's missionary activity. These texts of Vatican Council II fully retain their value even in our complex and pluralistic context.

First of all, this document, *Ad Gentes*, invites us to consider the love of God the Father as a wellspring, which "on account of His surpassing and merciful kindness and graciously calling us moreover to share with Him His life and His cry" — this is our vocation — "has generously poured out, and does not cease to pour out still, His divine goodness. Thus He who created all things may at last be 'all in all' (1 Cor 15:28), bringing about at one and the same time His own glory and our happiness" (no. 2). This passage is fundamental, because it says that the love of the Father is destined for *every human being*. God's love is not only for a small group, no ... for everyone. Keep that word firmly in mind and in the heart: everyone, everyone, no one excluded. This is what the Lord says, and this love for every human being is a love that reaches every man and woman through the mission of Jesus, mediator of salvation and our redeemer (cf. AG, 3), and through the mission of the Holy Spirit (cf. AG, 4), who — the Holy Spirit — works in everyone,

both in the baptized and the non-baptized. The Holy Spirit is at work!

The Council furthermore reminds us that it is the task of the Church to continue the mission of Christ, who was "sent to preach the Gospel to the poor"; therefore, the document *Ad Gentes* continues, "the Church, prompted by the Holy Spirit, must walk in the same path on which Christ walked: a path of poverty and obedience, of service and self-sacrifice to the death, from which death He came forth a victor by His resurrection" (AG, 5). If it remains faithful to this "path", the mission of the Church is "an epiphany, or a manifesting of God's decree, and its fulfilment in the world and in world history" (AG, 9).

Brothers and sisters, these brief comments also help us understand the ecclesial meaning of the apostolic zeal of each disciple-missionary. Apostolic zeal is not enthusiasm; it is something else, it is a grace from God, that we must preserve. We must understand its meaning, because in the pilgrim and evangelizing People of God, there are no active or passive individuals. There are not those who preach, those who proclaim the Gospel in one way or another, and those who remain silent. No! "All the baptized", says *Evangelii Gaudium,* "whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization" (Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium,* 120). "Are you Christian?" "Yes, I have received Baptism". "And do you evangelize?" "But what does this mean?" If you do not evangelize, if you do not bear witness, if you do not give that witness of the Baptism you have received, of the faith that the Lord gave you, you are not a good Christian. By virtue of the Baptism received and the consequent incorporation into the Church, every baptized person participates in the mission of the Church and, in this, in the mission of Christ the King, Priest and Prophet. Brothers and sisters, this task "is one and the same everywhere and in every condition, even though it may be carried out differently according to circumstances" (AG, 6). This invites us not to become rigid

or fossilized; it redeems us from that restlessness that is not of God. The missionary zeal of the believer also expresses itself as a creative search for new ways of proclaiming and witnessing, new ways of encountering the wounded humanity that Christ took on. In short, of new ways of serving the Gospel and serving humanity. Evangelization is a service. If someone says that they are an evangelizer, and they do not have that attitude, that servant's heart, and believe they are a master, they are not an evangelizer, no ... they are wretched.

Returning to the fountainhead of the love of the Father and to the missions of the Son and the Holy Spirit does not close us up in spaces of static personal tranquillity. On the contrary, it leads us to recognize the gratuitousness of the gift of the fullness of life to which we are called, this gift for which we praise and thank God. This gift is not only for us, but rather it is to be given to others. And it also leads us to live ever more fully what we have received, by sharing it with others, with a sense of responsibility and travelling together along the roads, very often the tortuous and difficult ones of history, in vigilant and industrious expectation of its fulfilment. Let us ask the Lord for this grace, to take in hand this Christian vocation and to give thanks to the Lord for what he has given us, this treasure. And to try to communicate it to others.

7. The Second Vatican Council. 2. Being Apostles in an Apostolic Church

March 15, 2023

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Let us continue the catechesis on the passion of evangelizing: not only on "evangelizing", but on the passion for evangelizing and, in accordance with Vatican Council II, let us try to understand better what it means to be "apostles" today. The word "apostle" reminds us of the group of the Twelve disciples chosen by Jesus. At times we refer to some saint, or more generally the bishops, as "apostles": they are apostles, because they go in the name of Jesus. But are we aware that being apostles concerns every Christian? Are we aware that it concerns each one of us? Indeed, we are called to *be apostles* — that is, envoys — *in a Church* that, in the Creed, we profess as *apostolic*.

So, what does it mean to be apostles? It means being *sent for a mission*. The event in which the Risen Christ sends his apostles into the world, passing on to them the power he himself received from the Father and giving them his Spirit, is exemplary and foundational. We read in the Gospel of John: "Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you'. And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'" (20:21-22).

Another fundamental aspect of being an apostle is the *vocation*, that is, the calling. It has been thus ever since the beginning, when the Lord Jesus "called to him those whom he desired; and they came to him" (Mk 3:13). He constituted them as a group, attributing to them the title of "apostle", so they would be with him and to send them on mission (cf. Mk 3:14; Mt 10:1-42). Saint Paul, in his

letters, presents himself as “Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle”, that is, an envoy (1 Cor 1:1), and again, “Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle” (Rm 1:1). And he insists on the fact that he is “an apostle not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead” (Gal 1:1); God called him from his mother’s womb to proclaim the gospel among the nations (cf. Gal 1:15-16).

The experience of the Twelve apostles and the testimony of Paul also challenges us today. They invite us to verify our attitudes, to verify our choices, our decisions, on the basis of these fixed points: everything depends on a gratuitous call from God; God also chooses us for services that at times seem to exceed our capacities or do not correspond with our expectations; the call received as a gratuitous gift must be answered gratuitously.

The Council says: “the Christian vocation by its very nature is also a vocation to the apostolate” (Decree *Apostolicam actuositatem* [AA], 2). It is a calling that is common, just as “a common dignity [is shared] as members from their regeneration in Christ, having the same filial grace and the same vocation to perfection; possessing in common one salvation, one hope and one undivided charity” (*Lumen gentium*, 32).

It is a call that concerns both those who have received the sacrament of Orders, consecrated persons, and all lay faithful, man or woman: it is a call to all. You, the treasure you have received with your Christian vocation, are obliged to give it: it is the dynamic nature of the vocation, the dynamic nature of life. It is a call that empowers them to actively and creatively perform their apostolic task, within a Church in which “there is a diversity of ministry but a oneness of mission. Christ conferred on the Apostles and their successors the duty of teaching, sanctifying, and ruling in His name and power. The laity likewise — all of you, the majority of you are laypeople — share in the priestly, prophetic, and royal office of Christ and therefore have their

own share in the mission of the whole people of God in the Church and in the world" (AA, 2).

In this framework, what does the Council mean by the collaboration of the laity with the hierarchy? How does it envisage this? Is it a mere strategic adaptation to new situations that arise? Not at all, not at all: there is something more, that exceeds the contingencies of the moment and which maintains its own value for us too. The Church is like this. She is apostolic.

Within the framework of the unity of the mission, the diversity of charisms and ministries must not give rise, within the ecclesial body, to privileged categories: here there is no promotion, and when you conceive of Christian life as a promotion, that the one who is above commands all the others because he has succeeded in climbing, this is not Christianity. This is pure paganism. The Christian vocation is not a promotion, so as to rise, no! It is something else. It is a great thing because, although "by the will of Christ some are" in an important position, perhaps doctors and "pastors and dispensers of mysteries on behalf of others, yet all share a true equality with regard to the dignity and to the activity common to all the faithful for the building up of the Body of Christ". (LG, 32). Who has more dignity in the Church: the bishop, the priest? No, we are all Christians in the service of others. Who is more important in the Church: the religious sister or the common person, the baptized, the child, the bishop...? They are all equal, we are equal and, when one of the parties thinks they are more important than the others, somewhat turning up their nose, they are making a mistake. That is not the vocation of Jesus. The vocation that Jesus gives, to everyone, but also to those who seem to be in the highest places, is service, serving others, humbling oneself. If you find a person in the Church who has a higher vocation and you see them as vain, you will say, "Poor soul"; pray for him, because he has not understood what God's vocation is. God's vocation is adoration of the Father, love

for the community, and service. This is what being apostles is, this is the witness of apostles.

The matter of equality in dignity asks us to rethink many aspects of our relations, which are decisive for evangelization. For example, are we aware of the fact that with our words we can undermine the dignity of people, thus ruining relationships within the Church? While we try to engage in dialogue with the world, do we also know how to dialogue among ourselves as believers? Or in the parish, one person goes against another, one speaks badly of another in order to climb up further? Do we know how to listen to understand another person's reasons, or do we impose ourselves, perhaps even with appeasing words? To listen, to be humble, to be at the service of others: this is *serving*, this is being Christian, this is being an apostle.

Dear brothers and sisters, let us not be afraid to ask these questions. Let us shun vanity, the vanity of positions. These words can help us to confirm how we live our baptismal vocation, how we live our way of being apostles in an apostolic Church that is at the service of others. Thank you.

8. The First Way of Evangelization: Witness” (*cfr. Evangelii Nuntiandi*)

March 22, 2023

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Today we will listen to the “magna carta ” of evangelization in the contemporary world: Saint Paul VI’s Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii nuntiandi* (EN, 8 December 1975). It is topical. It was written in 1975, but it is as though it had been written yesterday. Evangelization is more than just simple doctrinal and moral transmission. It is, first and foremost, *witness* — one cannot evangelize without witness — witness of the personal encounter with Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word in which salvation is fulfilled. An indispensable witness because, firstly, the world needs “evangelizers to speak to it of a God whom the evangelists themselves should know and be familiar with” (EN, 76). It is not transmitting an ideology or a “doctrine” on God, no. It is transmitting God who is living in me. This is witness. Also because, “modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses” (ibid., 41). The witness of Christ, then, is at the same time the first means of evangelization (cf. ibid.), and an essential condition for its efficacy (cf. ibid., 76), so that the proclamation of the Gospel may be fruitful. Being witnesses.

It is necessary to remember that witness also includes *professed faith*, that is, convinced and manifest adherence to God the Father and Son and Holy Spirit, who created us out of love, who redeemed us. A faith that transforms us, that transforms our relationships, the criteria and the values that determine our choices. Witness, therefore, cannot be separated from consistency between what one believes and what one proclaims, and what

one lives. One is not credible just by stating a doctrine or an ideology, no. A person is credible if there is harmony between what he or she believes and lives. Many Christians only say they believe, but they live something else, as if they did not. And this is hypocrisy. The opposite of witness is hypocrisy. How many times have we heard, "Ah, this person goes to Mass every Sunday and then he lives like this, or that": it is true, it is counter-witness.

Every one of us is called to respond to three fundamental questions, posed in this way by Paul VI: "Do you believe what you are proclaiming? Do you live what you believe? Do you preach what you live?" (cf. ibid.). Is there harmony: do you believe what you proclaim? Do you live what you believe? Do you proclaim what you live? We cannot be satisfied with easy, pre-packaged answers. We are called upon to accept the risk, albeit destabilizing, of the search, trusting fully in the action of the Holy Spirit who works in each one of us, driving us ever further: beyond our boundaries, beyond our barriers, beyond our limits, of any type.

In this sense, the witness of a Christian life involves a journey of *holiness*, based on Baptism, which makes us "sharers in the divine nature. In this way they are really made holy" (Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, 40). A holiness that is not reserved to the few; that is a gift from God and demands to be listened to and made to bear fruit for ourselves and for others. Chosen and beloved by God, we must bring this love to others. Paul VI teaches that *the zeal for evangelization springs from holiness*, it springs from the heart that is filled with God. Nourished by prayer and above all by love for the Eucharist, evangelization in turn increases holiness in the people who carry it out (cf. EN, 76). At the same time, without holiness, the word of the evangelizer "will have difficulty in touching the heart of modern man", and "risks being vain and sterile" (ibid.).

Therefore, we must be aware that the people to whom evangelization is addressed are not only others, those who profess other faiths or who profess none, but also *ourselves*, believers in Christ and active members of the People of God. And we must convert every day, receive the Word of God and change our life: every day. And this is how the heart is evangelized. To bear this witness, the Church as such must also begin by evangelizing herself. If the Church does not evangelize herself, she remains a museum piece. Instead, it is by evangelizing herself that she is continually updated. She needs to listen unceasingly to what she must believe, to her reasons for hope, to the new commandment of love. The Church, which is a People of God immersed in the world, and often tempted by idols — many of them — always needs to hear the proclamation of the works of God. In brief, this means that she has a constant need of being evangelized, she needs to read the Gospel, to pray and to feel the force of the Spirit changing her heart (cf. EN, 15).

A Church that evangelizes herself in order to evangelize is a Church that, guided by the Holy Spirit, is called to walk a demanding path, a path of conversion and renewal. This also entails the ability to change the ways of understanding and living her evangelizing presence in history, avoiding taking refuge in the protected zones of the logic of "it has always been done this way". They are the refuges that cause the Church to sicken. The Church must go forward; she must grow continually. In this way, she will remain young. This Church is entirely turned to God, therefore a participant in his plan of salvation for humanity, and, at the same time, entirely turned towards humanity. The Church must be a Church that dialogically encounters the contemporary world, that weaves fraternal relationships, that generates spaces of encounter, implementing good practices of hospitality, of welcome, of recognition and integration of the other and of otherness, and that cares for the common home that is creation. That is, a Church that dialogically encounters the contemporary world, that dialogues with the contemporary world, but

that encounters the Lord every day and dialogues with the Lord, and allows the Holy Spirit, the agent of evangelization, to enter. Without the Holy Spirit we can only publicize the Church, not evangelize. It is the Spirit in us that drives us towards evangelization, and this is the true freedom of the children of God.

Dear brothers and sisters, I renew my invitation to you to read and re-read *Evangelii nuntiandi*. I will tell you the truth, I read it often, because it is Saint Paul VI's masterpiece, it is the legacy he left to us, to evangelize.

9. Witnesses: Saint Paul. 1

March 29, 2023

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

In our journey of catechesis on apostolic zeal, let us start today to look at some figures who, in different ways and times, bore exemplary witness to what passion for the Gospel means. And the first witness is naturally the Apostle Paul. I would like to devote two catecheses to him.

The story of Paul of Tarsus is emblematic in this regard. In the first chapter of the Letter to the Galatians, as in the narration of the Acts of the Apostles, we can see that his zeal for the Gospel appears after his conversion, and takes the place of his previous zeal for Judaism. He was a man who was zealous about the law of Moses for Judaism, and after his conversion, this zeal continued, but to proclaim, to preach Jesus Christ. Paul loved Jesus. Saul — Paul's first name — was already zealous, but Christ converts his zeal: from the Law to the Gospel. His zeal first wanted to destroy the Church, whereas after, it builds it up. We might ask ourselves: what happened, that passed from destruction to construction? What changed in Paul? In what way was his zeal, his enthusiasm for the glory of God, transformed?

Saint Thomas Aquinas teaches that passion, from the moral point of view, is neither good nor evil: its virtuous use makes it morally good, sin makes it bad (Quaestio "*De veritate*" 24, 7). In Paul's case, what changed him is not a simple idea or a conviction: it was the encounter with the risen Lord. Do not forget this: it is the encounter with the Lord that changes a life. It was Saul's encounter with the risen Lord that transformed his entire being. Paul's humanity, his passion for God and his glory was not annihilated, but transformed, "converted" by the Holy Spirit. The only one who can change our hearts is the Holy Spirit. And it was so for every aspect of his life. Just as occurs in the Eucharist:

the bread and wine do not disappear, but become the Body and Blood of Christ. Paul's zeal remains, but it becomes the zeal of Christ. It changes direction, but the zeal is the same. The Lord is served with our humanity, with our prerogatives and our characteristics, but what changes everything is not an idea, but rather life itself, as Paul himself says: "if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come" (2 Cor 5:17). The encounter with Jesus Christ changes you from within, it makes you another person. If one is in Christ, he or she is a new creation, this is the meaning of being a new creation. To become Christian is not to apply make-up that changes your face, no! If you are Christian, your heart changes, but if you are Christian [only] in appearance, this will not do ... made-up Christians will not do. True change is of the heart. And this happened to Paul.

Passion for the Gospel is not a matter of comprehension or studies, which are helpful but which do not inspire it. Rather, it means going through the same experience of "fall and resurrection" that Saul/Paul lived and which is at the origin of the transfiguration of his apostolic zeal. You can study all the theology you want, you can study the Bible and all that, and become atheist or worldly, it is not a question of studies; in history there have been many atheist theologians! Studies are useful but they do not generate the new life of grace. Indeed, as Saint Ignatius of Loyola says: "For it is not knowing much, but realizing and relishing things interiorly, that contents and satisfies" (*Spiritual Exercises*, Annotations, 2, 4). It is about things that change you within, that let you know something else, savour something else. May each of us reflect: "Am I a religious person?" — "Fine" — "Do I pray?" — "Yes" — "Do I try to obey the commandments?" — "Yes" — "But where is Jesus in your life?" — "Ah, no, I do the things the Church commands". But where is Jesus? Have you encountered Jesus, have you spoken with Jesus? Do you pick up the Gospel or talk with Jesus, do you remember who Jesus is? And this is something that we very often lack. When Jesus

enters your life, like he entered Paul's life, Jesus enters and changes everything. Many times, we have heard comments about people: "But look at him, he was a wretch and now he is a good man, she is a good woman... who changed them?". Jesus, they found Jesus. Has your Christian life changed? "No, more or less, yes...". If Jesus did not enter your life, it did not change. "You can be Christian only on the outside". No, Jesus has to enter and this changes you, and this is what happened to Paul. We have to find Jesus, and this is why Paul said that Christ's love drives us, it is what takes you forward. The same change happened to all the saints, who went forward when they found Jesus.

We can reflect further on the change that takes place in Paul, who from a persecutor became an apostle of Christ. We note that there is a sort of paradox in him: indeed, as long as he feels he is righteous before God, he feels authorized to persecute, to arrest, even to kill, as in the case of Stephen; but when, enlightened by the Risen Lord, he discovers he was a "blasphemer and persecutor" (cf. 1 Tim 1:13) — this is what he says of himself, "I formerly blasphemed and persecuted" — then he starts to be truly capable of loving. And this is the way. If one of us says, "Ah, thank you Lord, because I am a good person, I do good things, I do not commit major sins...", this is not a good path, this is the path of self-sufficiency, it is a path that does not justify you, it makes you an elegant Catholic, but an elegant Catholic is not a holy Catholic, he is elegant. The true Catholic, the true Christian, is one who receives Jesus within, that changes your heart. This is the question I ask you all today: what does Jesus mean for me? Have I let him enter my heart, or do I keep him within reach but so that he does not really enter within? Have I let myself be changed by him? Or is Jesus just an idea, a theology that goes ahead... And this is zeal: when one finds Jesus and feels the fire, like Paul, they must preach Jesus, they must talk about Jesus, they must help people, they must do good things. When one finds the idea of Jesus, he or she remains an ideologue of Christianity, and this does

not save, only Jesus saves us, if you have encountered him and opened the door to your heart to him. The idea of Jesus does not save you! May the Lord help us find Jesus, encounter Jesus, and may this Jesus change our life from within and help us to help others.

10. Witnesses: Saint Paul. 2

April 12, 2023

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

After having seen Saint Paul's personal zeal for the Gospel, two weeks ago, we can now reflect more deeply on evangelical zeal as he himself speaks of it and describes it in some of his letters.

By virtue of his own experience, Paul is not unaware of the danger of a misguided zeal, oriented in the wrong direction. He himself had fallen into this danger before the providential fall on the road to Damascus. Sometimes we have to deal with a misdirected zeal, doggedly persistent in the observance of purely human and obsolete norms for the Christian community. "They make much of you," writes the Apostle, "but for no good purpose" (Gal 4:17). We cannot ignore the solicitude with which some devote themselves to the wrong pursuits even within the Christian community itself; one can boast of a false evangelical zeal while actually pursuing vainglory or one's own convictions or a little bit of love of self.

For this reason, we ask ourselves, what are the characteristics of true evangelical zeal according to Paul? The text we heard at the beginning seems useful for this, a list of "weapons" that the Apostle indicates for spiritual battle. Among these is *readiness to spread the Gospel*, translated by some as "zeal" — this person is zealous in carrying forward these ideas, these things — and referred to as a "shoe". Why? How is zeal for the Gospel related to what is worn on one's feet? This metaphor picks up on a text from the prophet Isaiah, who says this: "How beautiful upon the mountains / are the feet of him who brings good tidings, / who publishes peace, who brings good tidings of good, who publishes salvation, / who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns'" (52:7).

Here too, we find reference to the feet of a herald of good news. Why? Because those who go to proclaim must move; they must walk! But we also note that in this text, Paul speaks of footwear as part of a suit of armour, following the analogy of the equipment of a soldier going into battle: in combat it was essential to have stability of footing in order to avoid the pitfalls of the terrain — because the adversary often littered the battlefield with traps — and to have the strength to run and move in the right direction. So the footwear is for running and avoiding all these things of the adversary.

Evangelical zeal is the support on which proclamation is based, and heralds are somewhat like the feet of the body of Christ that is the Church. There is no proclamation without movement, without 'going out', without initiative. This means there is no Christian if not on the move; no Christian if the Christian does not go out of him or herself in order to set out on the journey and bear the proclamation. There is no proclamation without movement, without walking. One does not proclaim the Gospel by standing still, locked in an office, at one's desk or at one's computer, arguing like 'keyboard warriors' and replacing the creativity of proclamation with copy-and-paste ideas taken from here and there. The Gospel is proclaimed by moving, by walking, by going.

The term used by Paul to denote the footwear of those who bear the Gospel is a Greek word denoting readiness, preparation, alacrity. It is the opposite of being "slovenly", which is incompatible with love. In fact, elsewhere Paul says: "Never flag in zeal, be aglow with the Spirit, serve the Lord" (Rom 12:11). This attitude was the one required in the Book of Exodus to celebrate the sacrifice of the Passover deliverance: "In this manner you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it in haste. It is the Lord's Passover. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night" (12:11-12a).

A herald is ready to go, and knows that the Lord passes by in a surprising way. He or she must therefore be free from schemes and prepared for an unexpected and new action: prepared for surprises. One who proclaims the Gospel cannot be fossilised in cages of plausibility or the idea that "it has always been done this way", but is ready to follow a wisdom that is not of this world, as Paul says when speaking of himself: "my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God" (1 Cor 2:4-5).

Brothers and sisters, it is important to have this readiness for the newness of the Gospel, this attitude that involves momentum, taking the initiative, going first. It means not letting pass by the opportunities to promulgate the proclamation of the Gospel of peace, that peace that Christ knows how to give more and better than the world gives.

And this is why I exhort you to be evangelizers who are on the move, without fear, who go forward, in order to bring the beauty of Jesus, to bring the newness of Jesus who changes everything. "Yes, Father, he changes the calendar, because now we count the years before Jesus..." But he also changes hearts. And are you willing to let Jesus change your heart? Or are you a lukewarm Christian, who is not on the move? Think about it: Are you an enthusiast of Jesus, are you going forward? Think about it a bit.

11. Witnesses: The Martyrs

April 19, 2023

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

After talking about evangelization and talking about apostolic zeal, after considering the witness of Saint Paul, the true "champion" of apostolic zeal, today we will turn our attention not to a single figure, but to the host of *martyrs*, men and women of every age, tongue and nation who gave their life for Christ, who shed their blood to confess Christ. After the generation of the Apostles, they were the quintessential "witnesses" of the Gospel. Martyrs: the first was the deacon Saint Stephen, who was stoned to death outside the walls of Jerusalem. The word "martyr" derives from the Greek *martyria*, which means precisely, *witness*. A martyr is a witness, one who bears witness to the point of shedding their blood. However, very soon in the Church the word martyr began to be used to indicate those who bore witness to the point of shedding their blood. [1] That is, at first the word "martyr" meant giving daily witness. However, it was later used to indicate those who give their life by shedding [their blood]. Saint Augustine often underlines this dynamic of gratitude and the gratuitous reciprocation of giving. Here, for example, is what he preached on the feast of Saint Lawrence: "He performed the office of deacon; it was there that he administered the sacred chalice of Christ's blood; there that he shed his own blood for the name of Christ. The blessed apostle John clearly explained the mystery of the Lord's supper when he said, 'Just as Christ laid down his life for us, so we too ought to lay down our lives for the brethren' (1 Jn 3:16). Saint Lawrence understood this, my brethren, and he did it; and he undoubtedly prepared things similar to what he received at that table. He loved Christ in his life, he imitated him in his death" (Sermons 304, 14; pl 38, 1395-1397). In this way, Saint Augustine explained the spiritual dynamism that inspired the martyrs, with these words: martyrs love Christ in his life and imitate him in his death.

Today, dear brothers and sisters, let us remember all the martyrs who have accompanied the life of the Church. As I have already said many times before, *they are more numerous in our time than in the first centuries*. There are many martyrs in the Church today, many, because for confessing the Christian faith, they are banished from society or end up in prison... there are many. Vatican Council II reminds us that "martyrdom makes the disciple like his master, who willingly accepted death for the salvation of the world and through it he is conformed to him by the shedding of blood. Therefore the Church considers martyrdom the highest gift and supreme proof of love" (cf. Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, 42). Imitating Christ and with his grace, martyrs turn the violence of those who reject the proclamation into the supreme proof of love, which goes as far as the forgiveness of their own persecutors. This is interesting: martyrs always forgive their persecutors. Stephen, the first martyr, died as he prayed, "Lord, forgive them, for they know not what they do". Martyrs pray for their persecutors.

Although martyrdom is asked of only a few, "nevertheless all must be prepared to confess Christ before men. They must be prepared to make this profession of faith even in the midst of persecutions, which will never be lacking to the Church, in following the way of the cross" (ibid., 42). But, were these persecutions something of those times? No, no: today. Today there are persecutions of Christians throughout the world, many, many. There are more martyrs today than in the early times. Martyrs show us that every Christian is called to the witness of life, even when this does not go as far as the shedding of blood, making a gift of themselves to God and to their brethren, in imitation of Jesus.

And I would like to conclude by recalling the Christian witness present in every corner of the world. I am thinking, for example, of Yemen, a land that, for many years, has been wounded by a terrible, forgotten war, which has caused

many deaths and still causes many people to suffer today, especially children. In this very land there have been shining witnesses of faith, such as that of the Missionary Sisters of Charity, who gave their life there. They are still present today in Yemen, where they offer assistance to elderly people who are sick and to people with disabilities. Some of them have suffered martyrdom, but the others continue; they risk their lives, but they keep on going. These sisters welcome everyone, of any religion, because charity and fraternity have no boundaries. In July 1998, while they were returning home after Mass, Sister Aletta, Sister Zelia and Sister Michael were killed by a fanatic because they were Christian. More recently, in March 2016, shortly after the beginning of the still ongoing conflict, Sister Anselm, Sister Marguerite, Sister Reginette and Sister Judith were killed together with some laypeople who helped them in their charity work among the least. They are the martyrs of our time. Among these laypeople killed, as well as Christians there were some Muslim faithful who worked with the religious sisters. It moves us to see how the witness of blood can unite people of different religions. One should never kill in the name of God, because for him we are all brothers and sisters. But together one can give one's life for others.

Let us pray, then, that we may never tire of bearing witness to the Gospel, even in times of tribulation. May all the holy martyrs be seeds of peace and reconciliation among peoples, for a more humane and fraternal world, as we await the full manifestation of the Kingdom of Heaven, when God will be all in all (cf. 1 Cor 15:28).

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[1] Origen, *In Johannem*, II, 210: "Now everyone who bears witness to the truth, whether he support it by words or deeds, or in whatever way, may properly be called a witness (martyr); but it has come to be the custom of the brotherhood, since they are struck with admiration of those who have contended to the death for truth and valour, to keep the name of martyr more properly for those who have borne witness to the mystery of godliness by shedding their blood for it."

12. Witnesses: Monasticism and the Power of Intercession. Gregory of Narek

April 26, 2023

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Let us continue our catechesis on the witnesses of apostolic zeal. We started with Saint Paul, and last time we looked at the martyrs, who proclaim Jesus with their lives, to the point of giving their lives for him and for the Gospel. But there is another great witness that runs through the history of faith: that of the *nuns and monks*, sisters and brothers who renounce themselves and who renounce the world to imitate Jesus on the path of poverty, chastity and obedience, and to intercede on behalf of all. Their lives speak for themselves, but we might ask ourselves: how can people living in monasteries help the proclamation of the Gospel? Wouldn't they do better putting their energies into the mission? Coming out of the monastery and preaching the Gospel outside the monastery? In reality, the monks are the beating heart of the proclamation. Their prayer is oxygen for all the members of the Body of Christ, their prayer is the invisible force that sustains the mission. It is no coincidence that the patroness of the missions is a nun, Saint Therese of the Child Jesus. Let us listen to how she discovered her vocation — she wrote: "I understood that the Church had a Heart and that this Heart was burning with love. I understood it was Love alone that made the Church's members act, that if Love ever became extinct, apostles would not preach the Gospel and martyrs would not shed their blood. I understood that love comprised all vocations. [...] Then, in the excess of my delirious joy, I cried out: O Jesus, my Love.... my vocation, at last I have found it.... my vocation is love! [...] In the heart of the Church, my Mother, I shall be Love"

(*Autobiographical Manuscript* "B", 8 September 1896). Contemplatives, monks, nuns: people who pray, work, pray in silence, for all the Church. And this is love: it is the love that is expressed by praying for the Church, working for the Church, in the monasteries.

This love for everyone inspires the life of nuns and monks, and is translated into their prayer of intercession. In this regard, I would like to offer you the example of Saint Gregory of Narek, Doctor of the Church. He was an Armenian monk, who lived around the year 1000, who left us a book of prayers, into which the faith of the Armenian people, the first to embrace Christianity, is poured out; a people that, joined to the cross of Christ, has suffered so much throughout history. And Saint Gregory spent almost his entire life in the monastery of Narek. There he learned to peer into the depths of the human soul and, by fusing poetry and prayer together, marked the pinnacle of both Armenian literature and spirituality. What is most striking about him is the *universal solidarity* of which he is an interpreter. And among monks and nuns there is a universal solidarity: whatever happens in the world finds a place in their heart, and they pray. The heart of monks and nuns is a heart that captures like an antenna; it picks up what happens in the world, and prays and intercedes for this. And in this way they live in union with the Lord and with everyone. And Saint Gregory of Narek writes: "I have voluntarily taken upon myself all faults, from those of the first father down to the last of his descendants" (cf. Book of Lamentations, 72). And as Jesus did, monks and nuns take upon themselves the problems of the world, the difficulties, the ailments, many things, and they pray for others. And these are the great evangelizers. Why do monasteries live closed up, and evangelize? Because with the word, for example, intercession and daily work, monks and nuns are a bridge of intercession for all people and for sins. They weep, even shedding tears, they weep for their sins — we are all sinners — and they also weep for the sins of the world, and they pray and intercede with their hands and heart raised

up. Let us think a little of this — if I may permit myself the use of the word — "reserve" that we have in the Church: they are the true strength, the true force that carries the People of God forward, and this is where the habit comes from that people have — the People of God — of saying, "Pray for me, pray for me", when they meet a consecrated man or woman, because they know there is a prayer of intercession. It will do us good — to the extent we are able — to visit a monastery, because there one prays and works. Each one has its own rule, but their hands are always occupied: engaged in work, engaged in prayer. May the Lord give us new monasteries, may he give us new monks and nuns to carry the Church forward with their intercession. Thank you.

13. Witnesses: Saint Francis Xavier

May 17, 2023

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Continuing our itinerary of the Catecheses with some exemplary models of apostolic zeal — let us recall that we are speaking about evangelization, about apostolic zeal, about bearing the name of Jesus, and that there are many women and men in history who have done this in an exemplary way. Today, for example, we choose as an example Saint Francis Xavier, who some say is considered the greatest missionary of modern times. But it is not possible to say who is the greatest, who is the least, because there are many hidden missionaries who, even today, do much more than Saint Francis Xavier. And Xavier is the patron of missions, like Saint Therese of the Child Jesus. And a missionary is great when he or she goes. And there are many, many priests, lay people, women religious who go to missions, also from Italy, and many of you. I see it, for example, when I am presented with the life history of a priest, as a candidate to be [appointed] bishop: he spent 10 years on mission in that place... This is great: to leave your own country to preach the Gospel. This is apostolic zeal. And we have to nurture this a great deal. And looking at these men, at these women, we learn.

And Saint Francis Xavier was born into a noble but impoverished family in Navarre, northern Spain, in 1506. He went to study in Paris — he was a worldly young man, intelligent, good. There, he met Ignatius of Loyola, who made him do spiritual exercises and changed his life. And he left all his worldly career, to become a missionary. He became a Jesuit, took his vows. Then he became a priest and, sent to the East, he went to evangelize. At that time, the journeys of the missionaries to the East meant being

sent to unknown worlds. And he went, because he was filled with apostolic zeal.

He was the first of a numerous band of passionate missionaries in modern times, to depart, ready to endure immense hardships and dangers, to reach lands and meet peoples from completely unknown cultures and languages, driven only by the powerful desire to make Jesus Christ and his Gospel known.

In just over 11 years, he accomplished an extraordinary task. He was a missionary for more or less 11 years. Voyages by ship were very harsh and they were perilous at the time. Many people died en route due to shipwrecks or disease. Today unfortunately, they die because we let them die in the Mediterranean. Francis Xavier spent more than three and a half years on ships, a third of the entire duration of his mission. He spent three and a half years on ships to get to India, then from India to Japan.

He arrived in Goa, India, the capital of the Portuguese East, the cultural and commercial capital. Francis Xavier set up his base there, but did not remain there. He went on to evangelize the poor fishermen of the southern coast of India, teaching catechism and prayers to children, baptizing and caring for the sick. Then, while praying one night at the tomb of the apostle Saint Bartholomew, he felt he needed to go beyond India. He left the work he had already initiated in good hands and courageously set sail for the Maluku Islands, the most distant islands of the Indonesian archipelago. There were no horizons for these people; they went beyond... What courage these holy missionaries had! And today's missionaries too, even if they do not spend three months on a ship, but go on a plane for 24 hours. But it is the same thing there. They need to settle there, and travel many kilometres and immerse themselves in forests. And in the Maluku Islands, Xavier translated the catechism into the local language and taught the [people] to sing the catechism, because it can be learned better by singing. He

entered through song. We understand his feelings from his letters. He wrote: “All these dangers and discomforts, when borne for the love of our Lord Jesus Christ, are treasuries filled with heavenly consolations, so much so that [...] one might lose one’s eyesight from weeping so abundantly the sweetest tears of joy” (*Letter to the Society at Rome*, 21 January 1548. In H.J. Coleridge (Ed.), *The Life and Letters of St. Francis Xavier*, (Vol. I, p. 387). Burns and Oates). He cried for joy when beholding God’s work.

One day, in India, he met someone from Japan who spoke to him about his distant country, where no European missionary had ever ventured. Francis Xavier felt the restlessness of the apostle, of going beyond, and decided to depart as soon as possible, and he arrived there after an adventurous journey on a junk belonging to a Chinese man. His three years in Japan were very difficult due to the climate, opposition and his ignorance of the language. Here too, however, the seeds planted would bear great fruit.

In Japan, the great dreamer, Xavier, understood that the decisive country for his mission in Asia was another: China. With its culture, its history, its size, it exercised de facto dominance over that part of the world. Even today, China is a cultural centre with a vast history, a beautiful history. He thus returned to Goa, and shortly afterwards embarked again, hoping to enter China. But his plan failed: he died at the gates of China, on an island, the small island of Sancian (Shangchuan), in front of the Chinese shoreline, waiting in vain to be able to land on the mainland near Canton. On 3 December 1552, he died in total abandonment, with only a Chinese man standing beside to watch over him. Thus ended the earthly journey of Francis Xavier. He had aged, how old was he? Already 80? No.... He was only 46 years old. He had spent his life zealously in the missions. He left Spain, a highly developed country, and arrived in the most developed country at that time — China — and died at the threshold of great China, accompanied by a Chinese man. It was highly symbolic.

His intense activity was always joined with prayer, with the mystical and contemplative union with God. He never abandoned prayer because he knew that strength came from there. Wherever he went, he took great care of the sick, the poor and children. He was not an "aristocratic" missionary. He always went with the most in need, the children who were most in need of instruction, of catechesis. The poor, the sick... He specifically went to the boundaries of caring, where he grew in greatness. Christ's love was the strength that drove him to the furthest frontiers, with constant toil and danger, overcoming setbacks, disappointments and discouragement; indeed, giving him consolation and joy in following and serving Him to the end.

May Saint Francis Xavier, who did all these great things, in much poverty and with such courage, give us some of this zeal, of this zeal to live the Gospel and to proclaim the Gospel. To the many young people who feel restless today and do not know what to do with that restlessness, I say: Look to Francis Xavier, look at the horizons of the world, look at the people who are in great need, look at the many people who are suffering, so many people who need Jesus. And have the courage to go. Today too, there are courageous young people. I am thinking of the many missionaries, for example, in Papua New Guinea. I am thinking of my friends, young people who are in the Diocese of Vanimo, of all those who went to evangelize in the wake of Francis Xavier. May the Lord grant us all the joy to evangelize, the joy to uphold this message, which is so beautiful, which makes us, and everyone, happy.

14. Witnesses: Saint Andrea Kim Tae-gon

May 24, 2023

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

In this series of catecheses, we place ourselves in the school of some of the saints who, as exemplary witnesses, teach us apostolic zeal. Let us recall that we are talking about apostolic zeal, which is what we must have in order to proclaim the Gospel.

Today we are going to find a great example of a Saint with the passion for evangelisation in a land far away, namely the Korean Church. Let us look at Saint Andrew Kim Tae-gon, a martyr and Korea's first priest. But, the evangelisation of Korea was done by the laity! It was the baptized laity who transmitted the faith. There were no priests because they had none. They came later, so the first evangelisation was done by the laity. Would we be capable of something like that? Let's think about it: it is interesting. And he, Saint Andrew, was one of the first priests. His life was and remains an eloquent testimony of zeal for the proclamation of the Gospel.

About 200 years ago, the Korean land was the scene of a very severe persecution: Christians were persecuted and annihilated. At that time, believing in Jesus Christ in Korea meant being ready to bear witness unto death. Specifically from the example of Saint Andrew Kim, we can draw out two concrete aspects of his life.

The first is the way in which he had to meet with the faithful. Given the highly intimidating context, the saint was forced to approach Christians in a discreet manner, and always in the presence of other people, as if they had been talking to each other for a while. Then, in order to confirm his interlocutor's Christian identity, Saint Andrew would

implement these devices: first, there was a previously agreed upon sign of recognition: you will meet with this Christian and he will have this sign on his outfit or in his hand, after which he would surreptitiously ask the question — but under his breath — "Are you a disciple of Jesus?" Since other people were watching the conversation, the saint had to speak in a low voice, saying only a few words, the most essential ones. Thus, for Andrew Kim, the expression that summed up the whole identity of the Christian was "disciple of Christ". "Are you a disciple of Christ?"— but in a soft voice because it was dangerous. It was forbidden to be a Christian.

Indeed, being a disciple of the Lord means following him, following his path. And the Christian is by nature one who preaches and bears witness to Jesus. Every Christian community receives this identity from the Holy Spirit, and so does the whole Church, since the day of Pentecost (cf. Vatican Council ii, Decree *Ad Gentes*, 2). And it is from this Spirit that we receive passion, passion for evangelisation, this great apostolic zeal. It is a gift of the Spirit. And even if the surrounding context is not favourable — like the Korean context of Andrew Kim — the passion does not change. On the contrary, it becomes even more valuable. Saint Andrew Kim and other Korean believers have demonstrated that witnessing to the Gospel in times of persecution can bear much fruit for the faith.

Now let us look at a second concrete example. When he was still a seminarian, Saint Andrew had to find a way to secretly welcome missionaries from abroad. This was not an easy task, as the regime of the time strictly forbade all foreigners from entering the territory. This is why it had been so difficult to find a priest that would come to do missionary work, before this: the laity undertook the mission.

One time — think about what Saint Andrew did — one time, he walked in the snow, without eating, for so long that he fell to the ground exhausted, risking unconsciousness

and freezing. At that point, he suddenly heard a voice, “Get up and keep walking”! Hearing that voice, Andrew reawakened, and caught a glimpse of something like the shadow of someone who was guiding him.

This experience of the great Korean witness makes us understand a very important aspect of apostolic zeal; namely, the courage to get back up when one falls. But do saints fall? Yes! Indeed, from the earliest times. Think of Saint Peter: he committed a great sin, but he found strength in God’s mercy and got up again. And in Saint Andrew, we see this strength. He had fallen physically but he had the strength to go, go, go to carry the message forward.

No matter how difficult the situation may be — and indeed, at times it may seem to leave no room for the Gospel message — we must not give up and we must not forsake pursuing what is essential in our Christian life: namely, evangelisation. This is the path. And each of us can think: “But how can I evangelize”? Well look at these great ones, and think about your own small context. Do we think about it in relation to our own small context: evangelising the family, evangelising friends, talking about Jesus — but talking about Jesus and evangelising with a heart full of joy, full of strength. And this is given by the Holy Spirit. Let us prepare ourselves to receive the Holy Spirit this coming Pentecost, and ask him for that grace, the grace of apostolic courage, the grace to evangelize, to always carry the message of Jesus forward.

15. Witnesses: Venerable Matteo Ricci

May 31, 2023

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

We are continuing these catecheses speaking about apostolic zeal, that is, what the Christian feels in order to carry out the proclamation of Jesus Christ. And today I would like to present another great example of apostolic zeal: we have spoken about Saint Francis Xavier, Saint Paul, the apostolic zeal of the great zealots; today we will talk about one — Italian, but who went to China: Matteo Ricci.

Originally from Macerata, in the Marches, after studying in Jesuit schools and entering the Society of Jesus, he was enthused about the reports he heard from missionaries. He became enthusiastic, like many other young people who felt the same; he asked to be sent to the missions in the Far East. After the attempt by Francis Xavier, an additional 25 Jesuits had tried to enter China, without success. But Ricci and one of his confrères prepared themselves very well, carefully studying the Chinese language and customs, and in the end, they managed to settle in the south of the country. It took 18 years, with four stages through four different cities, to arrive in Peking (Beijing), which was the centre. With perseverance and patience, inspired by unshakeable faith, Matteo Ricci was able to overcome difficulties and dangers, mistrust and opposition. Imagine those times: on foot or riding a horse, such distances... and he went on. But what was Matteo Ricci's secret? By what road did his zeal drive him?

He always followed the way of dialogue and friendship with all the people he encountered, and this opened many doors to him for the proclamation of the Christian faith. His first work in Chinese was indeed the treatise, On Friendship, which had great resonance. To enter into Chinese culture and

life, at first he dressed like the Buddhist bonzes, according to the customs of the country, but then he realised that the best way was to assume the lifestyle and robes of the literati — like the university professors and the intellectuals dressed — and he dressed the same way. He studied their classical texts in depth, so that he could present Christianity in positive dialogue with their Confucian wisdom and with the customs and traditions of Chinese society. And this is called an attitude of inculturation. This missionary was able to "inculturate" the Christian faith in dialogue, as the ancient fathers had done with Greek culture.

His excellent scientific knowledge stirred interest and admiration on the part of cultured men, starting from his famous map of the entire world as it was known at the time, with the different continents, which revealed to the Chinese for the first time a reality outside China that was far more extensive than they had thought. He showed them that the world was larger than China, and they understood, because they were intelligent. But Ricci and his missionary followers' mathematical and astronomical knowledge also contributed to a fruitful encounter between the culture and science of the West and the East, which went on to experience one of its happiest times, characterized by dialogue and friendship. Indeed, Matteo Ricci's work would never have been possible without the collaboration of his great Chinese friends, such as the famous "Doctor Paul" (Xu Guangqi) and "Doctor Leon" (Li Zhizao).

However, Ricci's fame as a man of science should not obscure the deepest motivation behind all his efforts: namely, the proclamation of the Gospel. With scientific dialogue, with scientists, he went ahead, but he bore witness to his faith, to the Gospel. The credibility obtained through scientific dialogue gave him the authority to propose the truth of Christian faith and morality, of which he spoke in depth in his principal Chinese works, such as The true Meaning of the Lord of Heaven — as the book was called. In addition to doctrine, they are the witness of religious life,

virtue and prayer: these missionaries prayed. They went to preach, they were active, they made political moves, all of that; but they prayed. It is what nourished the missionary life, a life of charity; they helped others, humbly, with total disinterest in honours and riches, which led many of his Chinese disciples and friends to embrace the Catholic faith. Because they saw a man who was so intelligent, so wise, so astute — in the good sense of the word — in getting things done, and so devout, that they said, "But what he preaches is true, because it is being said by a personality that witnesses, he bears witness to what he preaches with his own life". This is the coherence of evangelizers. And this applies to all of us Christians who are evangelizers. We can recite the Creed by heart, we can say all the things we believe, but if our life is not consistent with this, it is of no use. What attracts people is the witness of consistency: we Christians must live as we say, and not pretend to live as Christians while living in a worldly way. Look at these great missionaries like Matteo Ricci who was Italian — looking at these great missionaries, you will see that the greatest strength is consistency: they were consistent.

In the last days of his life, to those who were closest to him and asked him how he felt, Matteo Ricci replied that he was thinking at that moment whether the joy and gladness he felt inwardly at the idea that he was close to his journey to go and savour God was greater than the sadness of leaving his companions of the whole mission that he loved so much, and the service that he could still do to God Our Lord in this mission (cf. S. De Ursis, Report on M. Ricci, Roman Historical Archive s.j.). This is the same attitude of the Apostle Paul (cf. Phil 1:22-24), who wanted to go to the Lord, to find the Lord, but to stay "to serve you".

Matteo Ricci died in Peking (Beijing) in 1610, at 57, a man who had given all his life for the mission. The missionary spirit of Matteo Ricci constitutes a relevant living model. His love for the Chinese people is a model; but the truly timely path is coherence of life, of the witness of his Christian belief.

He took Christianity to China; he is great, yes, because he is a great scientist, he is great because he is courageous, he is great because he wrote many books — but above all, he is great because he was consistent in his vocation, consistent in his desire to follow Jesus Christ. Brothers and sisters, today, let each of us ask ourselves inwardly, “Am I consistent, or am I a bit ‘so-so’?”

16. Witnesses: Saint Therese of the Child Jesus, Patron of the Missions

June 7, 2023

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Here before us are the relics of Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus, universal patroness of missions. It is good that this is happening as we reflect on the passion for evangelization, on apostolic zeal. Today, then, let us allow the witness of Saint Thérèse to help us. She was born 150 years ago, and I plan to dedicate an Apostolic Letter to her on this anniversary.

She is patroness of the missions, but she never went on mission. How do we explain this? She was a Carmelite nun who lived her life according to the way of littleness and weakness: she defined herself as "a small grain of sand". Having poor health, she died at the age of only 24. But though her body was sickly, her heart was vibrant, it was missionary. She recounts in her "diary" that her desire was to be a missionary, and that she wanted to be one, not just for a few years, but for the rest of her life, even until the end of the world. Thérèse was a "spiritual sister" to several missionaries. She accompanied them from her monastery with her letters, with her prayer, and by offering continuous sacrifices for them. Without being visible, she interceded for the missions, like an engine that, although hidden, gives a vehicle the power to move forward. However, she was often not understood by her fellow nuns: she received "more thorns than roses" from them, but she accepted everything lovingly, patiently, offering even these judgments and misunderstandings together with her illness. And she did this joyfully, for the needs of the Church, so that, as she said, "roses might fall on everyone", especially the most distant.

But now, I ask myself, we can ask ourselves, where did all this zeal, this missionary strength, and this joy of interceding come from? Two episodes that occurred before Thérèse entered the monastery help us to understand this.

The first concerns the day that changed her life, Christmas 1886, when God worked a miracle in her heart. Shortly after that, Thérèse would turn 14 years old. As the youngest child, she was pampered by everyone at home, but she was not raised badly. After returning from midnight Mass, however, her very tired father did not feel like being there when his daughter opened her gifts, and said, "Good thing it's the last year!" Thérèse, who was very sensitive and easily moved to tears, was hurt, and went up to her room and cried. But she quickly suppressed her tears, went downstairs and, full of joy, she was the one who cheered her father. What had happened? On that night, when Jesus had made himself weak out of love, she had become strong in spirit: in just a few moments, she had come out of the prison of her selfishness and self-pity; she began to feel that "charity entered her heart, with the need to forget herself" (cf. *Manuscript* A, 133-134). From then on, she directed her zeal toward others, so that they might find God, and, instead of seeking consolations for herself, she set out to "console Jesus, [to] make him loved by souls", because, as Thérèse, noted, "Jesus is sick with love and [...] the sickness of love cannot be cured except by love" (*Letter to Marie Guérin,* July 1890). This then was her daily resolution: to "make Jesus loved" (Letter to Céline, 15 October 1889), to intercede so that others would love him. She wrote, "I want to save souls and forget myself for them: I want to save them even after my death" (*Letter to Fr. Roulla*n, 19 March 1897). Several times she said, "I will spend my heaven doing good on earth". This is the first episode that changed her life at 14.

And her zeal was directed especially to sinners, to the "distant ones". This is revealed in the second episode. Thérèse heard about a criminal, who had been sentenced to death for horrible crimes — his name was Enrico Pranzini,

she writes down his name. He had been found guilty of the brutal murder of three people, and was destined for the guillotine; but he did not want to receive the consolations of the faith. Thérèse took him to heart and did all she could: she prayed in every way for his conversion, so that he, who with brotherly compassion she called "poor wretched Pranzini," might demonstrate a small sign of repentance and make room for God's mercy in which Thérèse trusted blindly. The execution took place. The next day, Thérèse read in the newspaper that just before laying his head on the block, Pranzini, "all of a sudden, seized by a sudden inspiration, turned around, grabbed a Crucifix that the priest handed to him and kissed three times the sacred wounds" of Jesus. The saint remarked, "Then his soul went to receive the merciful sentence of the One who declared that in Heaven there will be more joy for a single sinner who repents than for the ninety-nine righteous who have no need of repentance!" (*Manuscript* A, 135).

Brothers and sisters, such is the power of intercession moved by charity; such is the engine of mission! Missionaries, in fact — of whom Thérèse is patroness — are not only those who travel long distances, learn new languages, do good works, and are good at proclamation; no, a missionary is also anyone who lives as an instrument of God's love where they are. Missionaries are those who do everything so that, through their witness, their prayer, their intercession, *Jesus might pass by.*

This is the apostolic zeal that, let us always remember, never works by proselytism — never — or constraint, — never — but *by attraction*. Faith is born by attraction. One does not become Christian because they are forced by someone, but because they have been touched by love. More than having many available means, methods, and structures, which sometimes distract from what is essential, the Church needs hearts like Thérèse's, hearts that draw people to love and bring people closer to God. And let us ask the saint — we have her relics here — let us ask the saint for the grace

to overcome our selfishness and let us ask for the passion to intercede so that this attraction can be greater in people and so that Jesus might be known and loved.

17. Witnesses: Saint Mary MacKillop

June 28, 2023

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Today we must have a bit of patience, with this heat! Thank you for coming, with this heat, with this sun. Thank you very much for your visit!

In this series of catecheses on apostolic zeal, we are encountering some exemplary figures of men and women from all times and places, who have given their lives for the Gospel. Today we are going far away, to Oceania, a continent made up of many islands, large and small. Faith in Christ, which so many European emigrants brought to those lands, soon took root and bore abundant fruit (cf. Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Oceania*, 6). Among them was an extraordinary religious sister, Mary MacKillop (1842-1909), founder of the Sisters of Saint Joseph of the Sacred Heart, who dedicated her life to the intellectual and religious formation of the poor in rural Australia.

Mary MacKillop was born near Melbourne to parents who emigrated to Australia from Scotland. As a young girl, she felt called by God to serve him and bear witness to him not only with words, but above all with a life transformed by God's presence (cf. *Evangelii gaudium*, 259). Like Mary Magdalene, who first encountered the risen Jesus and was sent by him to bring the proclamation to the disciples, Mary was convinced that she too was sent to spread the Good News and attract others to an encounter with the living God.

Wisely reading the signs of the times, she understood that for her, the best way to do so was through the education of the young, with the awareness that Catholic education is a form of evangelization. It is a great form of evangelization. In

this way, if we can say that "each saint is a mission, planned by the Father to reflect and embody, at a specific moment in history, a certain aspect of the Gospel" (Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate*, 19), then Mary MacKillop was especially so through the founding of schools.

An essential characteristic of her zeal for the Gospel was caring for the poor and marginalized. And this is very important: on the path to holiness, which is the Christian path, the poor and marginalized are the protagonists, and a person cannot advance in holiness if he or she is not dedicated to them too, in one way or another. They, who are in need of the Lord, bring the Lord's presence. I once read a phrase that struck me; it said: The [real] protagonist of history is the beggar. Beggars are the ones who draw attention to injustice, that is, to the great poverty in the world. Money is spent on manufacturing weapons, not on providing meals. And do not forget: there is no holiness if, in one way or another, there is no care for the poor, the needy, those who are somewhat on the margins of society. This care for the poor and the marginalized drove Mary to go where others would not or could not go. On 19 March 1866, the feast of Saint Joseph, she opened the first school in a small suburb of South Australia. It was followed by many others that she and her sisters founded in rural communities throughout Australia and New Zealand. They multiplied, because apostolic zeal is like that: it multiplies works.

Mary MacKillop was convinced that the purpose of education is the integral development of the person both as an individual and as a member of the community; and that this requires wisdom, patience and charity on the part of every teacher. Indeed, education does not consist in filling the head with ideas: no, not just this. What does education constitute? Accompanying and encouraging students on the path of human and spiritual growth, showing them how friendship with the Risen Jesus expands the heart and makes life more humane. Educating and helping them to think well: to *listen carefully* (the language of

the heart) and to *do good* (the language of the hands). This vision is fully relevant today, when we feel the need for an "educational pact" capable of uniting families, schools and society as a whole.

Mary MacKillop's zeal for spreading the Gospel among the poor also led her to undertake a number of other charitable works, starting with the "House of Providence", which was opened in Adelaide to take in the elderly and abandoned children. Mary had great faith in God's Providence: she was always confident that in any situation, God provides. But this did not spare her from the anxieties and difficulties arising from her apostolate, and Mary had good reason for this: she had to pay bills, negotiate with local bishops and priests, manage the schools and look after the professional and spiritual formation of her Sisters; and, later, she suffered health problems. Yet, through it all, she remained calm, patiently carrying the cross that is an integral part of the mission.

On one occasion, on the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, Mary said to one of her Sisters: "My daughter, for many years I have learned to love the Cross". She did not give up in times of trial and darkness, when her joy was dampened by opposition or rejection. Look at this: all the saints faced opposition, even within the Church. This is curious. And she faced it too. She remained convinced that even when the Lord gave her "the bread of adversity and the water of affliction" (Is 30:20), the Lord Himself would soon answer her cry and surround her with His grace. This is the secret of apostolic zeal: a continuous relationship with the Lord.

Brothers and sisters, may Saint Mary MacKillop's missionary discipleship, her creative response to the needs of the Church of her time and her commitment to the integral formation of young people inspire all of us today, called to be a leaven of the Gospel in our rapidly changing societies. May her example and intercession support the daily work of parents, teachers, catechists and all educators, for the good of young people and for a more humane and hopeful future.

18. The Proclamation [of the Gospel] in the Mother Tongue: St Juan Diego, Messenger of the Blessed Virgin Mary

August 23, 2023

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

In our journey of rediscovering the passion for proclaiming the Gospel, seeing how apostolic zeal, this passion to proclaim the Gospel, has developed in the history of the Church; on this path, we look today to the Americas, where evangelisation has an ever vital source: Guadalupe. She is a living source. The Mexicans are happy! Of course, the Gospel had already reached there prior to those apparitions, but unfortunately it had also been accompanied by worldly interests. Instead of the path of inculturation, too often the hasty approach of transplanting and imposing pre-constituted models — European, for instance — had been taken, lacking respect for the Indigenous peoples.

The Virgin of Guadalupe, on the other hand, appears dressed in the clothing of the Indigenous peoples, she speaks their language, she welcomes and loves the local culture: Mary is Mother, and under her mantle every child finds a place. In her, God became flesh, and through Mary, He continues to incarnate Himself in the lives of peoples.

Our Lady, in fact, proclaims God in the most suitable language; that is, the mother tongue. And Our Lady also speaks to us in the mother tongue, the language we understand well. The Gospel is transmitted through the mother tongue. And I would like to say thank you to the many mothers and many grandmothers who pass [the Gospel] on to their children and grandchildren: faith is passed on with life; this is why mothers and grandmothers are the first

evangelizers. [Let's give] a round of applause for mothers and grandmothers! And the Gospel is communicated, as Mary shows, in simplicity: Our Lady always chooses those who are simple, on the hill of Tepeyac in Mexico, as at Lourdes and Fatima: speaking to them, she speaks to everyone, in a language suitable for all, in understandable language, like that of Jesus.

Let us dwell then on the testimony of Saint Juan Diego, who is the messenger; he is the young man, he is the Indigenous man who received the revelation of Mary: the messenger of Our Lady of Guadalupe. He was a simple man, an *indio* of the people: God, who loves to perform miracles through the 'little ones', had rested his gaze on him. Juan Diego was already a married adult when he embraced the faith. In December 1531, he is about 55 years old. While walking along, he sees on a hill the Mother of God, who tenderly calls out to him. And what does Our Lady call him? "My most beloved little child Juanito" (*Nican Mopohua*, 23). Then she sends him to the Bishop to ask him to build a church there where she had appeared. Juan Diego, simple and willing, goes with the generosity of his pure heart, but he has to wait a long time. He finally speaks to the Bishop, who does not believe him. Sometimes, we bishops [are like this]... He meets Our Lady again, who consoles him and asks him to try again. The *indio* returns to the Bishop and with great difficulty meets him, but the Bishop, after listening to him, dismisses him and sends men to follow [Juan Diego]. Here is the ordeal, the test of proclamation: despite zeal, the unexpected arrives, sometimes from the Church herself. To proclaim, in fact, it is not enough to bear witness to the good; it is necessary to know how to endure evil. Let's not forget this: it is very important to proclaim the Gospel; it is not enough to bear witness to the good, but it is necessary to know how to endure evil. A Christian does good, but also endures evil. Both go together; life is like that. Even today, in many places, inculturating the Gospel and evangelising cultures requires constancy and patience, not being afraid of conflict, not losing heart. I am thinking of a country where

Christians are persecuted because they are Christians, and they can't practice their faith easily and in peace. Juan Diego, discouraged because the Bishop sent him away, asks Our Lady to dispense him and appoint someone more respected and more capable than him, but he is invited to persevere. There is always the risk of a type of surrender in proclamation: something doesn't go right and one backs down, becoming discouraged and perhaps taking refuge in one's own certainties, in small groups, and in some personal devotions. Our Lady, on the other hand, while she consoles us, makes us push ahead and thus allows us to grow, like a good mother who, while following her son's steps, launches him into the world's challenges.

Thus encouraged, Juan Diego returns to the Bishop, who asks him for a sign. Our Lady promises Juan one, and comforts him with these words: "Let nothing frighten you, let nothing trouble your heart: [...] Am I not here, I who am your mother?" (ibid., 118-119). This is beautiful. Many times when we are in desolation, in sadness, in difficulty, Our Lady says this to us, too, in our hearts: "Am I not here, I who am your mother?". [She is] always close by to console us and give us the strength to go on.

Then she asks him to go to the arid hilltop to pick flowers. It is winter, but, nevertheless, Juan Diego finds some beautiful flowers, puts them in his cloak and offers them to the Mother of God, who invites him to take them to the Bishop as proof. He goes, patiently waits his turn and finally, in the presence of the Bishop, opens his *tilma*, which is what the Indigenous used to cover themselves. He opens his *tilma* to show the flowers, and behold! The image of Our Lady appears on the fabric of the cloak, the extraordinary and living image that we are familiar with, in whose eyes the protagonists of that time are still imprinted. This is God's surprise: when there is willingness and when there is obedience, He can accomplish something unexpected, in the time and in ways we cannot foresee. And so, the shrine requested by the Virgin was built, and it can be visited even today.

Juan Diego left everything and, with the Bishop's permission, dedicated his life to the shrine. He welcomed pilgrims and evangelised them. This is what happens in Marian shrines, pilgrimage destinations, and places of proclamation, where everyone feels at home — because it is the house of their *mamma*, the house of their mother — and experiences nostalgia for home, that is, the longing for the place where you find the Mother, Heaven. Faith is welcomed in these places in a simple way; the faith is welcomed in a genuine way, in a popular way. And as she told Juan Diego, Our Lady listens to our cries and heals our sorrows (cf. ibid., 32). We should learn this: when there are difficulties in life, we go to our Mother; and when life is happy, we also go to our Mother to share these things. We need to go to these oases of consolation and mercy, where faith is expressed in a maternal language; where we lay down the labours of life in Our Lady's arms and return to life with peace in our hearts, perhaps with the peace of little children.

19. To Pray and to Serve with Joy: Kateri Tekakwitha, First Native Saint of North America

August 30, 2023

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

At the General Audience on Wednesday, 30 August, Pope Francis continued his series of catecheses on apostolic zeal, this week reflecting on the life of Saint Kateri Tekakwitha, the first native North American woman to be canonized. He encouraged the faithful to follow Saint Kateri's example of complete trust in God. The following is a translation of the Holy Father's words.

Now, continuing our catechesis on the theme of apostolic zeal and passion for proclaiming the Gospel, we look today at Saint Kateri Tekakwitha, the first native North American woman to be canonized. Born around the year 1656 in a village in Upstate New York, she was the daughter of an unbaptized Mohawk chief and an Algonquin Christian mother, who taught Kateri to pray and sing hymns to God. Many of us were also first introduced to the Lord in family settings, especially by our mothers and grandmothers. This is how evangelization begins and, indeed, we must not forget that the faith is always transmitted in "dialect" by mothers, by grandmothers. Faith should be transmitted in dialect, and we received it in dialect from our mothers and grandmothers. Evangelism often begins this way: with simple, small gestures, such as parents helping their children learn to talk to God in prayer and telling them about His great and merciful love. And the foundation of faith for Kateri, and often for us as well, was laid in this way. She received it from her mother in dialect, the dialect of the faith.

When Kateri was four years old, a severe smallpox epidemic struck her people. Both of her parents and her younger brother died, and Kateri herself was left with scars on her face and vision problems. From then on, Kateri had to face many difficulties: the physical ones from the effects of smallpox, certainly, but also the misunderstandings, persecutions, and even death threats she suffered following her Baptism on Easter Sunday 1676. All this gave Kateri a great love for the Cross, the definitive sign of the love of Christ, who gave Himself to the end for us. Indeed, witnessing to the Gospel is not only about what is pleasing; we must also know how to bear our daily crosses with patience, trust, and hope. Patience in the face of difficulties, of crosses: patience is a great Christian virtue. He who does not have patience is not a good Christian. Patience to tolerate: to tolerate difficulties and also to tolerate others, who are sometimes annoying or cause difficulties. Kateri Tekakwitha's life shows us that every challenge can be overcome if we open our hearts to Jesus, who grants us the grace we need. Patience and a heart open to Jesus — this is a recipe for living well.

After being baptized, Kateri was forced to take refuge among the Mohawks in the Jesuit mission near the city of Montreal. There she attended Mass every morning, devoted time to adoration before the Blessed Sacrament, prayed the Rosary, and lived a life of penance. These spiritual practices of hers impressed everyone at the Mission; they recognized in Kateri a holiness that was appealing because it stemmed from her deep love for God. This is proper to holiness: to attract. God calls us through attraction; He calls us with this desire to be close to us, and she felt this grace of divine attraction. At the same time, she taught the children of the Mission to pray; and through the constant fulfilment of her responsibilities, including caring for the sick and elderly, she offered an example of humble and loving service to God and neighbour. The faith is always expressed through service. The faith is not about putting on make-up, putting make-up on the soul; no, it is to serve.

Although she was encouraged to marry, Kateri preferred to completely dedicate her life to Christ. Unable to enter the consecrated life, she made a vow of perpetual virginity on 25 March 1679. This choice of hers reveals another aspect of apostolic zeal that she had: total surrender to the Lord. Of course, not everyone is called to make the same vow as Kateri, but every Christian is called to give him- or herself daily with an undivided heart to the vocation and mission entrusted to them by God, serving Him and one's neighbour in a spirit of charity.

Dear brothers and sisters, Kateri's life is further proof that apostolic zeal implies both union with Jesus, nourished by prayer and the sacraments, and the desire to spread the beauty of the Christian message through fidelity to one's particular vocation. Kateri's last words are very beautiful. Before she died, she said, "Jesus, I love you."

May we too, like Saint Kateri Tekakwitha, draw strength from the Lord and learn to do ordinary things in extraordinary ways, growing daily in faith, charity and zealous witness for Christ.

Let us not forget: Each one of us is called to holiness, to everyday holiness, to the holiness of the common Christian life. Each one of us has this calling. Let us go forward along this path. The Lord will not fail us.

20. Blessed José Gregorio Hernández Cisneros, Doctor of the Poor and Apostle of Peace

September 13, 2023

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

In our catecheses, we continue to meet passionate witnesses to the proclamation of the Gospel. Let us recall that this is a series of catecheses on apostolic zeal, on the will and even the interior ardour to carry forward the Gospel. Today we go to Latin America, specifically to Venezuela, to get to know the figure of a layman, Blessed José Gregorio Hernández Cisneros. He was born in 1864 and learned the faith above all from his mother, as he recounted, "My mother taught me virtue from the time I was in a crib, made me grow in the knowledge of God and gave me charity as my guide". Let us take note: it is moms who pass on the faith. The faith is passed on in dialect, that is, in the language of moms, that dialect that moms use to speak with their children. And to you, moms: be mindful in passing on the faith in that maternal dialect.

Truly, charity was the north star that oriented the existence of Blessed José Gregorio: a good and joyful person with a cheerful disposition, he was endowed with a marked intelligence. He became a physician, a university professor, and a scientist. But he was first and foremost a doctor close to the weakest, so much so that he was known in his homeland as "the doctor of the poor". He cared for the poor, always. To the riches of money he preferred the riches of the Gospel, spending his existence to aid the needy. José Gregorio saw Jesus in the poor, the sick, migrants and the suffering. And the success he never sought in the world, he received, and continues to receive, from the people, who call him "saint of the

people", "apostle of charity", "missionary of hope". Beautiful names: "saint of the people", "apostle of the people", "missionary of hope".

José Gregorio was a humble man, a kind and helpful man. At the same time he was driven by an inner fire, a desire to live in the service of God and neighbour. Driven by this ardour, he tried to become a religious and a priest several times, but various health problems prevented him from doing so. Physical frailty did not, however, lead him to close in on himself, but rather to become a doctor who was even more sensitive to the needs of others. He clung to Providence and, forged in his soul, he went ever more toward what was essential. This is apostolic zeal: it does not follow one's own aspirations, but openness to God's designs. And so the Blessed understood that, through caring for the sick, he would put God's will into practice, comforting the suffering, giving hope to the poor, witnessing to the faith not in words but by example. So, by way of this interior path, he came to accept medicine as a priesthood: "the priesthood of human pain" (M. Yaber , *José Gregorio Hernández: Médico de los Pobres, Apóstol de la Justicia Social, Misionero de las Esperanzas*, 2004, 107). How important it is not to suffer things passively, but, as Scripture says, to do everything good-naturedly, to serve the Lord (cf. Col 3:23).

But let us ask ourselves however: where did José Gregorio get all this enthusiasm, all this zeal? It came from *a certainty* and *a strength*. *The certainty was God's grace*. He wrote that if there are good and bad people in the world, the bad are such because they themselves have become bad: but the good are such with God's help (27 May 1914). And he considered himself first of all to be in need of grace, begging on the streets and in dire need of love. And this was the strength he drew on: *intimacy with God*. He was a man of prayer — there is the grace of God and intimacy with the Lord. He was a man of prayer who participated at Mass.

And in contact with Jesus, who offers himself on the altar for all, José Gregory felt called to *offer his life for peace*. The First World War was underway. It was 29 June 1919: a friend came to visit him and found him very happy. José Gregorio had indeed learned that the treaty ending the war had been signed. His offering had been accepted, and it was as if he foresaw that his work on earth was done. That morning, as usual, he had been at Mass. He went down the street to bring medicine to a person who was sick. But as he was crossing the road, he was hit by a vehicle. He was taken to hospital and died saying Our Lady's name. This is how his earthly journey ended, on a road while performing a work of mercy, and in a hospital, where he had made his work a masterpiece, as a doctor.

Brothers, sisters, in the presence of this witness let us ask ourselves: How do I — face-to-face with God present in the poor near me, face-to-face with those in the world who suffer the most — react? And how does the example of José Gregorio affect me? He spurs us to engagement in the face of the great social, economic, and political issues of today. So many people talk about them, so many complain about them, so many criticize and say that everything is going wrong. But that is not what Christians are called to do. Instead, they are called to deal with it, to get their hands dirty: first of all, as Saint Paul told us, to pray (cf. 1 Tim 2:1-4), and then, not to engage in gossip — idle chatter is a plague — but to promote good, and to build peace and justice in truth. This, too, is apostolic zeal; it is the proclamation of the Gospel; and this is Christian beatitude: "Blessed are the peacemakers" (Mt 5:9).

Let us press on along the path of Blessed [José] Gregorio: a layman, a doctor, a man of daily work, who was driven by apostolic zeal to perform charity works throughout his whole life.

21. Saint Daniel Comboni, Apostle for Africa and a Prophet of Mission

September 20, 2023

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

In our journey of catechesis on the passion for evangelization, that is, apostolic zeal, today we will linger on the witness of Saint Daniel Comboni, an apostle who was filled with zeal for Africa. He wrote the following of these people: "they have taken possession of my heart that lives for them alone" (Writings, 941). "I shall die with Africa on my lips" (Writings, 1441). That is beautiful, isn't it? And he wrote this to them: "the happiest of my days will be when I may give my life for you" (Writings, 3159). This is the expression of someone who is in love with God and with the brothers and sisters he was serving in mission, whom he never tired of reminding that "Jesus Christ suffered and died for them as well" (Writings, 2499; 4801).

He affirmed this in a context characterized by the horror of slavery, which he witnessed. Slavery "objectifies" the human being, whose value is reduced to being useful to someone or something. But Jesus, God made man, elevated the dignity of every human being and exposed the falsity of every slavery. In the light of Christ, Comboni became aware of the evil of slavery. Moreover, he understood that social slavery is rooted in an even deeper slavery, that of the heart, of sin, from which the Lord frees us. As Christians, therefore, we are called to fight every form of slavery. However, unfortunately, like colonialism, slavery is not something from the past. Unfortunately. In the Africa that Comboni loved so much, which is today tormented by so many conflicts, "political exploitation gave way to an 'economic colonialism' that was equally enslaving. (...) This is a tragedy to which the economically more advanced world

often closes its eyes, ears and mouth". I therefore renew my appeal: "Stop choking Africa: it is not a mine to be stripped or a terrain to be plundered" (*Meeting with Authorities,* Kinshasa, 31 January 2023).

And let us return to Saint Daniel's life. After the first period he had spent in Africa, he had to leave the mission due to health reasons. Too many missionaries had died after contracting malaria, complicated by insufficient knowledge of the local situation. However, although others abandoned Africa, Comboni did not do so. After a period of discernment, he felt the Lord was inspiring him along a new path of evangelization, which he summed up in these words: "Save Africa with Africa" (Writings, 2741s). This was a powerful insight: there was nothing of colonialism in this. It was a powerful insight that helped renew his missionary outreach: the people who had been evangelized were not only "objects", but "subjects" of mission. And Saint Daniel Comboni wanted to make all Christians, protagonists in the work of evangelization. With this spirit, he thought and took action in an integral way, involving the local clergy and promoting the lay service of catechists. Catechists are a treasure of the Church. Catechists are those who bring evangelization forward. He also saw human development in this way, supporting the arts and professions, fostering the role of the family and of women in the transformation of culture and society. And how important it is, even today, to make faith and human development progress within the context of mission, rather than transplanting external models or limiting them to sterile welfarism! Neither external models nor welfarism. Finding the path of evangelization in the people's culture; evangelizing the culture and inculturating the Gospel go hand in hand.

Comboni's great missionary passion, however, was not primarily the fruit of human endeavour. He was not driven by his courage or motivated solely by important values such as freedom, justice and peace. His zeal came from the joy of the Gospel. He drew from Christ's love which

then led to love of Christ! Saint Daniel wrote, “Such an arduous and laborious mission as ours cannot be glossed over, lived by crooked-necked people filled with egoism and with themselves, who do not care for their health and the conversion of souls as they should”. This is the tragedy of clericalism which leads Christians, laity included, to become clericalized and to transform themselves — as it says here — into people with crooked necks filled with egoism. This is the plague of clericalism. And he added, “It is necessary to inflame them with charity that has its source from God and the love of Christ; when one truly loves Christ, then privations, sufferings and martyrdom become sweet” (Writings, 6656). He wanted to see ardent, joyful, dedicated missionaries, “holy and capable” missionaries — he wrote — “first of all saints, that is, completely free from sin and offence to God and humble. But this is not enough: we need charity that enables our subjects” (Writings, 6655). For Comboni, the source of missionary ability, therefore, is charity, in particular, the zeal by which he made the suffering of others his own.

In addition, his passion for evangelization never led him to act as a soloist, but always in communion, in the Church. “I have only one life to consecrate to the salvation of these souls: I wish I had a thousand to spend them all to such a purpose” (Writings, 2271).

Brothers and sisters, Saint Daniel is a witness of the love of the Good Shepherd who goes in search of the one who is lost and gives his life for the flock. His zeal was energetic and prophetic in being opposed to indifference and exclusion. In his letters, he earnestly called out to his beloved Church which had forgotten Africa for too long. Comboni’s dream is a Church that makes common cause with those who are crucified in history, so as to experience the resurrection with them. At this time, I would like to offer all of you a suggestion. Think of those who are being crucified in today’s history: men, women, children, the elderly, all those who are being crucified by the history of

injustice and domination. Let us think about them and let us pray for them. His witness seems to want to repeat to all of us, men and women of the Church: “Do not forget the poor — love them — for Jesus crucified is present in them, waiting to rise again”. Let us not forget the poor. Before I came here, I had a meeting with Brazilian legislators who are working for the poor, who try to promote the poor through assistance and social justice. And then do not forget the poor — they work for the poor. To all of you, [I say]: do not forget the poor, because they will be the ones who will open the door of Heaven for you.

22. Saint Josephine Bakhita: Witness of the Transforming Power of Christ's Forgiveness

October 11, 2023

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

In our journey of catechesis on apostolic zeal — we are reflecting on apostolic zeal — today we let ourselves be inspired by the witness of Saint Josephine Bakhita, a Sudanese saint. Unfortunately, for months Sudan has been torn by a terrible armed conflict, of which little is said today; let us pray for the Sudanese people, so they might live in peace! But Saint Bakhita's fame has exceeded every boundary and reached all those to whom identity and dignity are denied.

Born in Darfur — battered Darfur! — in 1869, she was abducted from her family at the age of seven, and made a slave. Her abductors called her "*Bakhita*", which means "fortunate". She had eight different masters — each one sold her on to the next. The physical and moral suffering she experienced as a child left her with no identity. She suffered cruelty and violence: on her body she bore more than a hundred scars. But she herself testified: "As a slave I never despaired, because I felt a mysterious force supporting me".

In the face of this, I wonder: what was Saint Bakhita's secret? We know that a wounded person often wounds in turn: the oppressed easily becomes the oppressor. Instead, the vocation of the oppressed is that of freeing themselves and their oppressors, becoming restorers of humanity. Only in the weakness of the oppressed can the strength of God's love, which frees both, be revealed. Saint Bakhita expresses this truth very well. One day her tutor gave her a small crucifix and she, who had never owned anything, treasured it jealously. Looking at it, she experienced inner

liberation, because *she felt she was understood and loved* and therefore *capable of understanding and loving*: this was the beginning. She felt she was understood, she felt loved, and as a consequence, capable of understanding and loving others. Indeed, she would go on to say: "God's love has always accompanied me in a mysterious way... The Lord has loved me very much: you have to love everyone ... you have to have pity!". This is Bakhita's soul. Truly, to feel pity means both to *suffer with* the victims of the great inhumanity in the world, and also to pity those who commit errors and injustices, not justifying, but humanizing. This is the caress she teaches us: to humanize. When we enter the logic of fighting, of division among us, of bad feelings, one against the other, we lose our humanity. And very often we think we are in need of humanity, of being more humane. And this is the work that Saint Bakhita teaches us: to humanize, to humanize ourselves and to humanize others.

When Saint Bakhita, became Christian, she was transformed by the following words of Christ, upon which she meditated every day: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Lk 23:34). That is why she used to say: "If Judas had asked Jesus for forgiveness, he too would have found mercy". We can say that St Bakhita's life became an *existential parable of forgiveness*. It is nice to be able to say about someone: "he was capable, she was capable of forgiving, always". And she was always capable of forgiving; indeed, her life is an existential parable of forgiveness. To forgive because we will be forgiven. Do not forget this: forgiveness, which is God's caress to all of us.

Forgiveness set her free. Forgiveness she first received through God's merciful love, and then the forgiveness given, made her a free, joyful woman, capable of loving.

Bakhita was able to experience service not as slavery, but as an expression of the free gift of self. And this is very

important: made a servant against her will — she was sold as a slave — she later freely chose to become a servant, to bear the burdens of others on her shoulders.

Saint Josephine Bakhita, by her example, shows us the way to finally be free from our slavery and fears. She helps us to unmask our hypocrisies and selfishness, to overcome resentments and conflicts. And she encourages us, always.

Dear brothers and sisters, forgiveness takes away nothing but adds — what does forgiveness add? — dignity: forgiveness takes away nothing from you but adds dignity to the person; it makes us lift our gaze from ourselves and towards others, to see them as fragile as we are, yet always brothers and sisters in the Lord. Brothers and sisters, forgiveness is the wellspring of *a zeal that becomes mercy and calls us to a humble and joyful holiness*, like that of Saint Bakhita.

23. Saint Charles de Foucauld, the Beating Heart of Charity in the Hidden Life

October 18, 2023

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Let us continue in our encounter with some Christian witnesses, rich in zeal for proclaiming the Gospel. Apostolic zeal, the zeal for proclamation: we are looking at some Christians who have been an example of this apostolic zeal. Today I would like to talk to you about a man who made Jesus and his poorest brothers and sisters his life passion. I am referring to Saint Charles de Foucauld, who "drawing upon his intense experience of God, made a journey of transformation towards feeling a brother to all" (Encyclical Letter *Fratelli tutti,* 286).

And what was the "secret" of Charles de Foucauld, of his life? After living his youth being distant from God, without believing in anything other than the disordered pursuit of pleasure, he confides this to a non-believing friend, to whom, after having converted by accepting the grace of God's forgiveness in Confession, he reveals the reason of his life. He writes: "I have lost my heart to Jesus of Nazareth". [1] Brother Charles thus reminds us that the first step in evangelizing is to have Jesus inside one's heart; it is to "fall head over heels" for him. If this does not happen, we can hardly show it with our lives. Instead, we risk talking about ourselves, the group to which we belong, a morality or, even worse, a set of rules, but not about Jesus, his love, his mercy. I see this in some new movements that are emerging: they talk about their vision of humanity, they talk about their spirituality and they feel theirs is a new path... But why do you not talk about Jesus? They talk about many things, about organization, about spiritual journeys, but they do not know how to talk about

Jesus. I think that today it would be good for each one of us to ask him or herself: “Do I have Jesus at the centre of my heart? Have I ‘lost my head’ a bit for Jesus?”.

Charles had, to the extent that he went from *attraction to Jesus to imitation of Jesus*. Advised by his confessor, he goes to the Holy Land to visit the places where the Lord lived and to walk where the Master walked. In particular, it is in Nazareth that he realises he must be formed in Christ’s teachings. He experiences an intense relationship with the Lord, spends long hours reading the Gospels, and feels like His little brother. And as he gets to know Jesus, the desire to make Jesus known arises in him. It always happens like this. When one of us gets to know Jesus better, the desire to make him known, to share this treasure, arises. In his commentary on the account of Our Lady’s visit to Saint Elizabeth, He makes him say: I have given myself to the world... take me to the world. Yes, but how is this done? Like Mary did in the mystery of the Visitation: “in silence, by example, by life”. [2] With one’s life, because “our entire existence”, writes Brother Charles, “must shout the Gospel”. [3] And very often our existence shouts worldly things, it calls out many stupid things, strange things, and he says: No, “all our existence must shout the Gospel”.

He then decides to settle in distant regions to cry out the Gospel in silence, living in the spirit of Nazareth, in poverty and concealment. He goes to the Sahara Desert, among non-Christians, and he goes there as a friend and a brother, bearing the meekness of Jesus the Eucharist. Charles lets Jesus act silently, convinced that “Eucharistic life” evangelizes. Indeed, he believes that Christ is the first evangelizer. And so he remains in prayer at Jesus’ feet, before the Tabernacle, for a dozen hours a day, certain that the evangelizing power resides there and feeling that it is Jesus who brings him close to so many distant brothers. And do we, I ask myself, believe in the power of the Eucharist? Does our going out to others, our service, find its beginning and its fulfilment there, in adoration? I am convinced that we

have lost the sense of adoration: we must regain it, starting with us, consecrated people, bishops, priests, religious sisters and all consecrated persons: "wasting" time before the tabernacle, regaining the sense of adoration.

Charles de Foucauld wrote: "Every Christian, then, must become an apostle", [4] and he reminds a friend that "close to priests we need laypeople who see what the priest does not see, who evangelize with a closeness of charity, with a kindness for all, with an affection always ready to give of itself ". [5] Holy laypeople, not climbers. And those laypeople — that layman, that laywoman — who are in love with Jesus, make the priest understand that he is not an official, that he is a mediator, a priest. How we priests need to have beside us these laypeople who truly believe, and who show us the way by their witness. Charles de Foucauld, with this experience, foreshadows the times of Vatican Council II; he intuits the importance of the laity and understands that the proclamation of the Gospel is up to the entire People of God. But how can we increase this participation? The way Charles de Foucauld did: by kneeling and welcoming the action of the Spirit, who always inspires new ways to engage, meet, listen and dialogue, always in collaboration and trust, always in communion with the Church and pastors.

Saint Charles de Foucauld, a figure who is a prophecy for our time, bore witness to the beauty of communicating the Gospel through *the apostolate of meekness*: considering himself a "universal brother" and welcoming everyone, he shows us the evangelizing power of meekness, of tenderness. Let us not forget that God's style is summarized in three words: closeness, compassion and tenderness. God is always near, he is always compassionate, he is always tender. And Christian witness must take this road: of closeness, compassion and tenderness. And this is how he was, meek and tender. He wanted everyone he met to see, through his goodness, the goodness of Jesus. Indeed, he used to say he was a "servant to someone much better than I". [6] Living Jesus' goodness led him to

forge fraternal bonds of friendship with the poor, with the Tuareg, with those furthest from his mentality. Gradually these bonds generated fraternity, inclusion, appreciation of the other's culture. Goodness is simple and asks us to be simple people, who are not afraid to offer a smile. And with his smile, with his simplicity, Brother Charles bore witness to the Gospel. Never by proselytism, never: by witness. One does not evangelize by proselytism, but by witness, by attraction.

So lastly, let us ask ourselves whether we carry within us and to others, Christian joy, Christian meekness, Christian tenderness, Christian compassion, Christian closeness. Thank you.

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[1] *Lettres à un ami de lycée. Correspondance avec Gabriel Tourdes* (1874-1915), Paris 2010, 161.

[2] *Crier l'Evangile*, Montrouge 2004, 49.

[3] M/314 in C. de Foucauld, *La bonté de Dieu. Méditations sur les Saints Evangiles* (1), Montrouge 2002, 285.

[4] *Letter to Joseph Hours, in Correspondances lyonnaises* (1904-1916), Paris 2005, 92.

[5] Ivi, 90.

[6] *Carnets de Tamanrasset* (1905-1916), Paris 1986, 188.

24. Saints Cyril and Methodius, Apostles of the Slavs

October 25, 2023

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Today I will talk to you about two brothers, very famous in the east, to the point of being called "the apostles of the Slavs": Saints Cyril and Methodius. Born into an aristocratic family in Greece in the ninth century, they renounced a political career to devote themselves to monastic life. But their dream of a secluded existence was short-lived. They were sent as missionaries to Great Moravia, which at the time included various people who had already been partly evangelized, but among whom many pagan customs and traditions survived. Their prince was looking for a teacher to explain the Christian faith in their language.

Cyril and Methodius' first task was therefore to study the culture of those people in depth. Always the same refrain: faith must be inculturated and the culture evangelized. Inculturation of faith, evangelization of culture, always. Cyril asked if they had an alphabet; they told him they did not. He replied: "Who can write a speech on water?". Indeed, to proclaim the Gospel and to pray, one needed a proper, suitable, specific tool. So, he invented the Glagolitic alphabet. He translated the Bible and liturgical texts. People felt that the Christian faith was no longer 'foreign', and that it had become their faith, spoken in their own mother tongue. Just think: two Greek monks giving an alphabet to the Slavs. It is this openness of heart that enabled the Gospel to take root among them. Those two had no fear, they were courageous.

Very soon, however, some opposition emerged from some Latins, who saw themselves deprived of their monopoly in preaching to the Slavs; that fight within the Church, always that way. Their objection was religious, but only in appearance: God can be praised, they said, only in the three languages written on the cross: Hebrew, Greek and Latin. They were close-minded in defence of their own autonomy. But Cyril responded forcefully: God wants all people to praise him in their own language. Together with his brother Methodius, he appealed to the Pope, and the latter approved their liturgical texts in the Slavic language. He [the Pope] had them placed on the altar of the Church of Saint Mary Major, and he sang the Lord's praises with them, according to those books. Cyril died a few days later, and his relics are still venerated here in Rome, in the Basilica of Saint Clement. Methodius, instead, was ordained a bishop and sent back to the Slav territories. He would suffer a great deal there, he would even be imprisoned, but, brothers and sisters, we know that the Word of God was not shackled, and it spread throughout those peoples.

Looking at the witness of these two evangelizers, whom Saint John Paul II chose as co-patrons of Europe and on whom he wrote the Encyclical *Slavorum Apostoli,* let us turn to three important aspects.

First of all, *unity*. The Greeks, the Pope, the Slavs: at that time, there was an undivided Christianity in Europe, which collaborated in order to evangelize.

A second important aspect is *inculturation*, of which I said something earlier: evangelizing the culture and inculturation show that evangelization and culture are closely connected. One cannot preach the Gospel in an abstract, distilled way, no: the Gospel must be inculturated and it is also an expression of culture.

A final aspect is *freedom*. Preaching requires freedom, but freedom always needs courage. One is free to the extent that one is courageous and does not let oneself be shackled by many things that take away freedom.

Brothers and sisters, let us ask Saints Cyril and Methodius, apostles of the Slavs, to help us be instruments of "freedom in charity" for others — being creative, being constant and being humble, with prayer and with service.

25. Madeleine Delbrêl. The Joy of Faith among Non-Believers

November 8, 2023

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Among the many witnesses of the passion for the proclamation of the Gospel, those impassioned evangelizers, today I will present a 20th-century French woman, the venerable Servant of God, Madeleine Delbrêl. She was born in 1904 and died in 1964. She was a social worker, writer and mystic, and she lived for more than 30 years in the poor, working class outskirts of Paris. Dazzled by the encounter with the Lord, she wrote: "Once we have heard God's Word, we no longer have the right not to accept it; once we have accepted it, we no longer have the right not to let it become flesh in us; once it has become flesh in us, we no longer have the right to keep it for ourselves alone. Henceforward, we belong to all those who are waiting for the Word" (*We, the Ordinary People of the Streets*, trans. David Louis Schindler, Jr. and Charles F. Mann. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000, 62). Beautiful: what she wrote is beautiful.

After an adolescence of agnosticism — she believed in nothing — at the age of around 20, Madeleine encountered the Lord, struck by the witness of some friends who were believers. So she set out in search of God, giving voice to a profound thirst that she felt within, and she came to learn that the "emptiness that cried out her anguish" was God who was seeking her (cf. *The Dazzling Light of God*, trans. Mary Dudro Gordon. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2023). The joy of faith led her to choose a life that was given entirely to God, in the heart of the Church and in the heart of the world, simply sharing her life in fraternity with the "street people". This is how she poetically addressed Jesus: "To be with you on your path, we must go, even when our laziness

begs us to stay. You have chosen us to stay in a strange balance, a balance that can be achieved and maintained only in movement, only in momentum. A bit like a bicycle, which does not stay upright unless its wheels turn [...]. We can stay upright only by going forward, moving, in a surge of charity". It is what she calls the "spirituality of the bicycle" (cf. *Umorismo nell'Amore. Meditazioni e poesie*, Milan 2011, 56). Only on the move, on the go, do we live in the balance of faith, which is an imbalance, but it is like that: like the bicycle. If you stop, it does not stay upright.

Madeleine had a constantly outgoing heart, and she let herself be challenged by the cry of the poor. She felt that the Living God of the Gospel should burn within us until we have taken his name to those who have not yet found it. In this spirit, oriented towards the stirrings of the world and the cry of the poor, Madeleine felt called to "live Jesus' love entirely and to the letter, from the oil of the good Samaritan to the vinegar of Calvary, thus giving him love for love [...] because, by loving him without reserve and letting ourselves be loved completely, the two great commandments of charity are incarnated in us and become but one" (cf. *La vocation de la charité, 1, Œuvres complètes* xiii, Bruyères-le-Châtel, 138-139).

Lastly, Madeleine teaches us yet another thing: that by evangelizing one is evangelized; by evangelizing we are evangelized. Therefore, she used to say, echoing Saint Paul: "Woe to me if evangelizing, I do not evangelize myself". Indeed, evangelizing evangelizes oneself. And this is a beautiful doctrine.

Looking to this witness of the Gospel, we too learn that in every personal or social situation or circumstance of our life, the Lord is present and calls us to inhabit our own time, to share our life with others, to mingle with the joys and sorrows of the world. In particular, she teaches us that even secularized environments are helpful for conversion, because contact with non-believers prompts

the believer to a continual revision of his or her way of believing and to rediscovering faith in its essentiality (cf. *We, the Ordinary People of the Streets* trans. David Louis Schindler, Jr. and Charles F. Mann. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

May Madeleine Delbrêl teach us to live this faith "on the move", so to speak, this fruitful faith that makes every act of faith an act of charity in the proclamation of the Gospel. Thank you.

26. Proclamation is Joy

November 15, 2023

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

After encountering several witnesses of the proclamation of the Gospel, I propose summarizing this series of catecheses on apostolic zeal in four points, inspired by the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, whose 10th anniversary we celebrate this month. The first point, which we will see today — the first of the four — cannot but relate to the attitude on which the substance of the evangelizing gesture depends: *joy*. The Christian message, as we have heard from the angel's words to the shepherds, is the proclamation of "a great joy" (Lk 2:10). And the reason? Good news, a surprise, a beautiful event? Much more, a Person: Jesus! Jesus is the joy. He is the God made man who came to us. The question, dear brothers and sisters, is therefore not *whether* to proclaim it, but *how* to proclaim it, and this "how" is joy. Either we proclaim Jesus with joy, or we do not proclaim him, because another way of proclaiming him is not capable of bringing the true reality of Jesus.

This is why a discontent Christian, a sad Christian, a dissatisfied, or worse still, resentful or rancorous Christian, is not credible. This person will talk about Jesus but no one will believe him! Once someone said to me, talking about these Christians, "But these are po-faced Christians!", that is, they express nothing, they are like that, and joy is essential. It is essential to keep watch over our emotions. Evangelization works in gratuitousness, because it comes from fullness, not from pressure. And when one evangelizes — one would try to do this, but it does not work — on the basis of ideologies, this is not evangelizing, this is not the Gospel. The Gospel is not an ideology. The Gospel is a proclamation, a proclamation of joy. Ideologies are cold, all of them. The Gospel has the warmth of joy. Ideologies

do not know how to smile. The Gospel is a smile; it makes you smile because it touches the soul with the Good News.

The birth of Jesus, in history as in life, is the source of joy: think of what happened to the disciples of Emmaus, who could not believe their joy, and the others, then, the disciples all together, who when Jesus went to the Upper Room, could not believe their joy (cf. Lk 24:13-35). The joy of having the risen Jesus. An encounter with Jesus always brings you joy, and if this does not happen to you, it is not a true encounter with Jesus.

And what Jesus does with the disciples tells us that *the first who need to be evangelized are the disciples.* We are the first who need to be evangelized, we Christians — it is us. And this is very important. Immersed in today's fast-paced and confused environment, we too in fact, may find ourselves living our faith with a subtle sense of renunciation, persuaded that the Gospel is no longer heard and no longer worth striving to proclaim. We might even be tempted by the idea of letting "others" go their own way. Instead, this is precisely the time to return to the Gospel to discover that Christ "is for ever young and a constant source of newness" (*Evangelii gaudium*, 11).

Thus, like the two at Emmaus, one returns to daily life with the enthusiasm of one who has found a treasure: they were joyful, those two, because they had found Jesus, and he changed their life. And one discovers that humanity abounds with brothers and sisters waiting for a word of hope. The Gospel is awaited even today. People of today are like people of all times: they need it. Even the civilization of programmed unbelief and institutionalized secularity; indeed, especially the society that leaves the spaces of religious meaning deserted, needs Jesus. This is the right moment for the proclamation of Jesus. Therefore, I would like to say again to everyone: "The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow,

inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ joy is constantly born anew" (ibid., 1). Let us not forget this. And if any one of us does not perceive this joy, they should ask themselves if they have found Jesus. An inner joy. The Gospel takes the path of joy, always; it is the great proclamation. I invite all Christians, wherever and in whatever situation they may be, to renew their encounter with Jesus Christ today. Each one of us, let us take a little time today and think: "Jesus, you are within me. I want to encounter you every day. You are a Person, you are not an idea; you are a travelling companion, you are not a programme. You are the Love that solves many problems. You are the beginning of evangelization. You, Jesus, are the source of joy!". Amen.

27. Proclamation is for Everyone

November 22, 2023

Dear brothers and sisters,

After having seen, last time, that the Christian proclamation is joy, today let us focus on a second aspect: it is *for everyone* ; Christian proclamation is a joy for everyone. When we truly meet the Lord Jesus, the wonder of this encounter pervades our life and demands to be taken beyond us. He desires this, that his Gospel be for everyone. Indeed, there is a "humanizing power" in it, a fulfilment of life that is destined for every man and woman, because Christ was born, died, and rose again for everyone. For everyone: no-one excluded.

In *Evangelii Gaudium* we read that everyone has "a right to receive the Gospel. Christians have the duty to proclaim the Gospel without excluding anyone. Instead of seeming to impose new obligations, they should appear as people who wish to share their joy, who point to a horizon of beauty and who invite others to a delicious banquet. It is not by proselytizing that the Church grows, but 'by attraction'" (no. 14). Brothers, sisters, let us feel that we are at the service of the *universal destination of the Gospel* ; it is for everyone. And let us distinguish ourselves for our capacity to come out of ourselves — a proclamation, in order to be true, must leave behind one's own selfishness — and let us also have the capacity to overcome all boundaries. Christians meet on the parvis more than in the sacristy, and go "to the streets and lanes of the city" (Lk 14:21). They must be open and expansive. Christians must be "extroverts", and this character of theirs comes from Jesus, who made his presence in the world a continuous journey, aimed at reaching everyone, even learning from some of his encounters.

In this sense, the Gospel reports Jesus' surprising encounter with a foreign woman, a Canaanite who begs him to cure her sick daughter (cf. Mt 15:21-28). Jesus refuses, saying that he was sent only "to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" and that "it is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs" (vv. 24, 26). But the woman, with the insistence typical of the simple, replies that "even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table" (v. 27). Jesus is struck by this and says, "Woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire" (v. 28). The encounter with this woman has something unique about it. Not only does someone make Jesus change his mind, and a woman, a foreigner and a pagan, but the Lord himself finds confirmation that his preaching should not be limited to the people to whom he belongs, but open to all.

The Bible shows us that when God calls a person and makes a pact with some of them, this is always the criterion: *elect someone to reach others*. This is the criterion of God, of God's calling. All the Lord's friends have experienced the beauty, but also the responsibility and the burden, of being "chosen" by him. And everyone has felt discouragement in the face of their own weaknesses or the loss of their certainties. But perhaps the greatest temptation is that of considering the calling received as a privilege: please, no. The calling is not a privilege, ever. We cannot say that we are privileged compared to others — no. The calling is for a service. And God chooses one in order to love everyone, to reach everyone.

It is also to prevent the temptation of identifying Christianity with a culture, with an ethnicity, with a system. In this way, it [would] lose its truly *Catholic* nature, that is, for everyone, universal: it is not a small group of first-class, chosen people. Let us not forget: God chooses someone in order to love *all*. This horizon of universality. The Gospel is not only for me; it is for everyone. Let us not forget this. Thank you.

28. Proclamation is for Today

November 29, 2023

Dear brothers and sisters,

The last few times, we saw that Christian proclamation is a *joy*, and it is *for everyone*; today we will look at a third aspect: it is *for today*.

One almost always hears bad things being said about today. Certainly, with wars, climate change, worldwide injustice and migration, family and hope crises, there is no shortage of cause for concern. In general, the present seems to be inhabited by a culture that puts the individual above all else and technology at the centre of everything, with its ability to solve many problems and its enormous advances in so many fields. But at the same time, this culture of technical-individual progress leads to the affirmation of a freedom that does not want to set itself limits and is indifferent to those who fall behind. And so, it consigns great human aspirations to the often voracious logic of the economy, with a vision of life that discards those who do not produce and struggles to look beyond the immanent. We could even say that we find ourselves in the first civilization in history that globally seeks to organize a human society without God's presence, concentrated in huge cities that remain horizontal despite their vertiginous skyscrapers.

The account of the city of Babel and its tower comes to mind (cf. Gen 11:1-9). It narrates a social project that involves sacrificing all individuality to the efficiency of the collective. Humanity speaks only one language — we might say that it has a "single way of thinking" — as if enveloped in a kind of general spell that absorbs the uniqueness of each into a bubble of uniformity. Then God confuses the languages, that is, He re-establishes differences, recreates the conditions for uniqueness to develop, revives the multiple where ideology would like to impose the single.

The Lord also distracts humanity from its delirium of omnipotence: "Let us make a name for ourselves", say the 'exalted' inhabitants of Babel (v. 4), who want to reach all the way to heaven, to put themselves in God's place. But these are dangerous, alienating, destructive ambitions, and the Lord, by confounding these expectations, protects mankind, preventing an impending disaster. This story really does seem topical: even today, cohesion, instead of fraternity and peace, is often based on ambition, nationalism, homologation and techno-economic structures that inculcate the conviction that God is insignificant and useless: not so much because one seeks *more knowledge*, but above all for the sake of *more power*. It is a temptation that pervades the great challenges of today's culture.

In *Evangelii Gaudium* I tried to describe some of them (cf. nos. 52-75), but above all I called for "an evangelization capable of shedding light on these new ways of relating to God, to others and to the world around us, and inspiring essential values. It must reach the places where new narratives and paradigms are being formed, bringing the word of Jesus to the inmost soul of our cities" (no. 74). In other words, Jesus can be proclaimed only by inhabiting the culture of one's own time; and always taking to heart the words of the Apostle Paul about the present: "Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor 6:2). There is therefore no need to contrast today with alternative visions from the past. Nor is it sufficient to simply reiterate acquired religious convictions that, however true, become abstract with the passage of time. A truth does not become more credible because one raises one's voice in speaking it, but because it is witnessed with one's life.

Apostolic zeal is never a simple repetition of an acquired style, but testimony that the Gospel is alive for us here today. Aware of this, let us therefore look at our age and our culture as a gift. They are ours, and evangelizing them does not mean judging them from afar, nor standing on a balcony and shouting out Jesus' name, but rather going

down to the streets, going to the places where one lives, frequenting the spaces where one suffers, works, studies and reflects, inhabiting the crossroads where human beings share what has meaning in their lives. It means being, as a Church, a leaven for "dialogue, encounter, unity. After all, our own formulations of faith are the fruit of dialogue and encounter among cultures, communities and various situations. We must not fear dialogue: on the contrary, it is precisely confrontation and criticism that help us to preserve theology from being transformed into ideology" (*Address at the Fifth National Congress of the Italian Church*, Florence, 10 November 2015).

It is necessary to stand at the crossroads of today. Leaving them would impoverish the Gospel and reduce the Church to a sect. Frequenting them, on the other hand, helps us Christians understand the reasons for our hope in a renewed way, in order to extract and to share "what is new and what is old", from the treasure of faith (Mt 13:52). In short, more than wanting to convert the world of today, we need to *convert pastoral care* so that it better incarnates the Gospel today (cf. *Evangelii gaudium,* 25). Let us make Jesus' desire our own: to help fellow travellers not to lose the desire for God, to open their hearts to him and find the only One who, today and always, gives peace and joy to humanity.

29. The Proclamation is in the Holy Spirit

December 6, 2023

Dear brothers and sisters,

In the last catecheses, we saw that the proclamation of the Gospel is *joy*, it is f*or everyone*, and it is addressed to *today*. Now let us discover a final essential characteristic: it is necessary that the proclamation take place in the Holy Spirit. Indeed, to "communicate God", the joyful credibility of the testimony, the universality of the proclamation and the timeliness of the message are not enough. Without the Holy Spirit, all zeal is vain and falsely apostolic — it would only be our own and would not bear fruit.

In *Evangelii gaudium* I recalled that "Jesus is the first and greatest evangelizer"; that "in every activity of evangelization, the primacy always belongs to God", who has "called us to cooperate with him and who leads us on by the power of his Spirit" (no. 12). Here is the primacy of the Holy Spirit! Thus, the Lord compares the dynamism of the Kingdom of God to "a man [who scatters] seed upon the ground and should sleep and rise night and day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he knows not how" (Mk 4:26-27). The Spirit is the protagonist; he always precedes the missionaries and makes the fruit grow. This knowledge comforts us a great deal! And it helps us to specify another, equally decisive: namely, that in her apostolic zeal the Church does not announce herself, but a grace, a gift, and the Holy Spirit is precisely the Gift of God, as Jesus said to the Samaritan woman (cf. Jn 4:10).

The primacy of the Spirit should not, however, induce us to indolence. Confidence does not justify disengagement. The vitality of the seed that grows by itself does not authorize farmers to neglect the field. In giving his last recommendations before ascending to

heaven, Jesus said: “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you shall be my witnesses... to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

The Lord has not left us theological lecture notes or a pastoral manual to apply, but the Holy Spirit who inspires the mission. And the courageous initiative that the Spirit instils in us leads us to imitate his style, which always has two characteristics: *creativity* and *simplicity*.

Creativity, to proclaim Jesus with joy, to everyone and today. In this age of ours, which does not help us have a religious outlook on life, and in which the proclamation has become in various places more difficult, arduous, apparently fruitless, the temptation to desist from pastoral service may arise. Perhaps one takes refuge in safety zones, like the habitual repetition of things one always does, or in the alluring calls of an “intimist” spirituality, or even in a misunderstood sense of the centrality of the liturgy. They are temptations that disguise themselves as fidelity to tradition, but often, rather than responses to the Spirit, they are reactions to personal dissatisfactions. Instead, pastoral creativity, being bold in the Spirit, ardent in his missionary zeal, is the proof of fidelity to him. Therefore, I wrote that “Jesus can also break through the dull categories with which we would enclose him, and he constantly amazes us by his divine creativity. Whenever we make the effort to return to the source and to recover the original freshness of the Gospel, new avenues arise, new paths of creativity open up, with different forms of expression, more eloquent signs and words with new meaning for today’s world” (*Evangelii gaudium*, 11).

Creativity, therefore; and then *simplicity*, precisely because the Spirit takes us to the source, to the “first proclamation”. Indeed, it is “the fire of the Spirit [... that] leads us to believe in Jesus Christ who, by his death and resurrection, reveals and communicates to us the Father’s infinite mercy” (ibid., n. 164). This is the *first proclamation*,

which must “be the centre of all evangelizing activity and all efforts at Church renewal”; to say over and over, “Jesus Christ loves you; he gave his life to save you; and now he is living at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen and free you” (ibid).

Brothers and sisters, let us allow ourselves to be drawn by the Spirit and invoke him every day; may he be the source of our being and our work; may he be at the origin of every activity, encounter, meeting and proclamation. He enlivens and rejuvenates the Church: with him we must not fear, because he, who is *harmony*, always keeps creativity and simplicity together, inspires communion and sends out in mission, opens to diversity and leads back to unity. He is our strength, the breath of our proclamation, the source of apostolic zeal. Come, Holy Spirit!

30. Ephphatha, Church, Be Open!

December 13, 2023

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today we will conclude the series dedicated to apostolic zeal, in which we have allowed the Word of God to inspire us, to help nurture a passion for the proclamation of the Gospel. And this involves every Christian. Let us consider the fact that in Baptism, the celebrant, touching the ears and the lips of the baptized, says: "May the Lord Jesus, who made the deaf hear and the mute speak, grant that you may soon receive his word and profess the faith".

And we have heard the miracle of Jesus. The evangelist Mark goes to great lengths to describe where this took place: toward "the Sea of Galilee" (Mk 7:31). What do these two regions have in common? The fact that they were predominantly inhabited by pagans. They were not areas inhabited by Jews, but mostly by pagans. The disciples went out with Jesus, who can open the ears and the mouth, thus, the phenomenon of mutism, of deafness, which is also metaphorical in the Bible, signifying being closed to God's calls. There is a physical deafness, but in the Bible, the one who is deaf to the Word of God is mute, and does not communicate the Word of God.

There is another indicative sign: the Gospel reports Jesus' decisive word in Aramaic. Ephphatha which means "be open", may the ears be open, may the tongue be open. And it is an invitation that is addressed not so much to the deaf man, who could not hear him, but precisely to the disciples of that time and of every age. We too, who have received the ephphatha of the Spirit in Baptism, are called to be open. "Be open", Jesus says to every believer and to his Church: be open because the Gospel message needs you to witness it and proclaim it! And this makes us also

think about the attitude of Christians: Christians must be open to the Word of God and service to others. Christians who are closed up always end up badly because they are not Christians. They are ideologists of closure. A Christian must be open to the proclamation of the Word, and to welcoming brothers and sisters. And this is why ephphatha, this "be open" is an invitation to us all to open ourselves.

Even at the end of the Gospel, Jesus entrusts us with his missionary desire: go beyond, go to tend, go preach the Gospel.

Brothers, sisters, let us all feel called, as baptized people, to witness and proclaim Jesus. And let us ask for the grace, as Church, to bring about a pastoral and missionary conversion. On the banks of the Sea of Galilee, the Lord asked Peter if he loved him and then asked him to tend his sheep (cf. vv. 15-17). Let us too ask ourselves. Let each one of us ask ourselves this question, let us ask ourselves: Do I truly love the Lord to the point of wanting to proclaim him? Do I want to become his witness or am I content to be his disciple? Do I take to heart the people I meet, bringing them to Jesus in prayer? Do I want to do something so that the joy of the Gospel, which has transformed my life, may make their lives more beautiful? Let us think about this, let us think about these questions and go forward with our witness.


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