Ongoing Formation 2023

Renewing the Newness
"Ipsa novitas innovanda est"
First Lenten Sermon 2023
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The history of the Church in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has left us a bitter lesson that we should not forget so as not to repeat the mistake that caused it. I speak of the delay (indeed of the refusal) to take note of the changes that had taken place in society, and of the crisis of Modernism that was its consequence.

Anyone who has studied that period, even superficially, knows the damage it caused for one side and the other, that is, both for the Church and for the so-called "modernists." The lack of dialogue, on the one hand, pushed some of the best-known modernists into ever more extreme and in the end clearly heretical positions; on the other hand, it deprived the Church of enormous energy, causing endless lacerations and suffering within her, making her withdraw more and more into herself and causing her to lose pace with the times.

The Second Vatican Council was a prophetic initiative to make up for lost time. It has brought about a renewal which is certainly not the case to illustrate again here. More than its contents, we are interested at this moment in the method it inaugurated, which is to walk through history, alongside humanity, trying to discern the signs of the times.

The history and life of the Church did not stop with Vatican II. Woe to making of it what some have attempted to do with the Council of Trent, that is, a finish line and an immovable goal. If the life of the Church were to stop, it would happen like a river that reaches a barrier: it inevitably turns into a quagmire or a swamp.

"Do not think," Origen wrote in the third century, "that it is enough to be renewed only once; we need to renew the same novelty" – Ipsa novitas innovanda est. Before him, the new doctor of the Church, St. Irenaeus had written: the revealed truth is "like a precious liquor contained in a valuable pot. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, it always rejuvenates and also makes the vessel that contains it rejuvenate." The "vessel" that contains the revealed truth is the living tradition of the Church. The "precious liquor" is, in the first place, Scripture, but Scripture read in the Church, which is the most correct definition of Tradition. The Spirit is, by its nature, novelty. The Apostle exhorts the baptized to serve God "in the newness of the Spirit and not in the staleness of the letter" (Rom 7:6).

Not only did society not stop at the time of Vatican II, but it underwent a vertiginous acceleration. Changes that used to take a century or two now take a decade. This need for continuous renewal is nothing other than the need for continuous conversion, extended from the individual believer to the whole Church in its human and historical component. The Ecclesia semper reformanda. The real problem, therefore, does not lie in the novelty; it is rather in the way we deal with it. Let me explain. Every novelty and every change is a crossroads; it can take two opposite paths: either that of the world or that of God: either the path of death or the path of life. The Didache, written while at least one of the twelve apostles was still alive, already illustrated these two ways.

Now we have an infallible means to take the path of life and light every time: the Holy Spirit. It is the certainty that Jesus gave to the apostles before leaving them: "I will ask the Father and he will give you another Paraclete so that he may remain with you forever" (Jn 14:16). And again: "The Spirit of truth will guide you into the whole truth" (Jn 16:13). He won't do it all at once, or once and for all, but as situations arise. Before leaving them definitively, at the moment of the Ascension, the Risen

One reassured his disciples about the assistance of the Paraclete: "You will receive," he says, "strength from the Holy Spirit who will descend upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

The intent of the five Lenten sermons that we begin today, very simply, is precisely this: to encourage us to put the Holy Spirit at the heart of the whole life of the Church, and, in particular, at this moment, at the heart of the synodal works. In other words, take up the pressing invitation that the Risen One addresses, in the Apocalypse, to each of the seven churches of Asia Minor: "Let anyone who has ears listen to what the Spirit says to the churches" (Rev 2:7).

It is the only way that I myself have not to remain completely extraneous to the ongoing commitment to the synod. In one of my first sermons to the Papal Household, 43 years ago, I said in the presence of Saint John Paul II: "All my life I continued to do the humble job I did as a child." And I explained why. My maternal grandparents farmed a vast hilly land as sharecroppers. In June or July, there was the harvest, all done by hand, with the sickle, hunched over in the sun. It was very hard work! My little cousins and I were in charge of constantly bringing water to the reapers to drink. That's what, I said, I've been doing for the rest of my life. The reapers have changed, they are now the workers in the Lord's vineyard, and the water is different, it is now the Word of God. A job, mine, much less tiring, to tell the truth, than that of the workers in the field, but also, I hope, useful and somehow necessary.

In this first sermon, I will limit myself to collecting the lesson that comes to us from the nascent Church. In other words, I would like to show how the Holy Spirit guided the apostles and the Christian community to take their first steps in history. When the words of Jesus mentioned above on the assistance of the Paraclete were written down by John, the Church had already had practical experience of them, and it is precisely this experience, the exegetes tell us, which is reflected in the words of the evangelist.

The Acts of the Apostles show us a Church which is, step by step, "led by the Spirit." Her guidance is exercised not only in big decisions but also in minor matters. Paul and Timothy want to preach the gospel in the province of Asia, but "the Holy Spirit forbids them;" they are about to head towards Bithynia, but, it is written, "the Spirit of Jesus does not allow them" (Acts 16:6). From what follows, we understand the reason for this so pressing guide: the Holy Spirit thus prompted the nascent Church to leave Asia and to turn toward a new continent, Europe (cf. Acts 16:9). Paul comes to define himself, in his choices, "prisoner of the Spirit" (Acts 20:22).

It is not a straight and smooth path, that of the nascent Church. The first major crisis was related to the admission of Gentiles into the Church. There is no need to recall its progress. We are only interested in remembering how the crisis is resolved. Peter goes to Cornelius and the pagans — it is the Spirit who commands him (cf. Acts 10:19; 11:12). And how is the decision made by the apostles in Jerusalem to welcome pagans into the community without forcing them to be circumcised and to comply with all the Mosaic legislation, motivated and communicated? It is resolved with those extraordinary opening words: "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us…" (15:28).

It is not a question of making the archeology of the Church, but of bringing to light, always anew, the paradigm of every ecclesial decision. In fact, it does not take much effort to see the analogy between the opening up that was then made towards the gentiles, with the one that is imposed today towards the laity, and in particular women. It is therefore worth recalling the motivation that prompted Peter to overcome his perplexities and to baptize Cornelius and his family. We read in the Acts:

While Peter was still speaking these things, the holy Spirit fell upon all who were listening to the word. The circumcised believers who had accompanied Peter were astounded that the gift of the holy Spirit should have been poured out on the Gentiles also, for they could hear them speaking in tongues and glorifying God. Then Peter responded, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people, who have received the holy Spirit even as we have?" (Acts 10:44-47)

Called to justify his conduct in Jerusalem, Peter recounts what had happened in the house of Cornelius and concludes by saying:

I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, "John baptized with water but you will be baptized with the holy Spirit." If then God gave them the same gift he gave to us when we came to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to be able to hinder God?

If we look closely, it is the same motivation that prompted the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council to redefine the role of the laity in the Church, namely the doctrine of charisms. We know the text well, but it is always useful to recall it:

It is not only through the sacraments and the ministries of the Church that the Holy Spirit sanctifies and leads the people of God and enriches it with virtues, but, "allotting his gifts to everyone according as He wills" (1 Cor 12:11), He distributes special graces among the faithful of every rank. By these gifts He makes them fit and ready to undertake the various tasks and offices which contribute toward the renewal and building up of the Church, according to the words of the Apostle: "The manifestation of the Spirit is given to everyone for profit" (1 Cor 12:7). These charisms, whether they be the more outstanding or the more simple and widely diffused, are to be received with thanksgiving and consolation for they are perfectly suited to and useful for the needs of the Church (LG, 12).

We are faced with the rediscovery of the nature of the Church which is not only hierarchical but also charismatic. St. John Paul II, in Novo millennio ineunte (n. 45) made it even more explicit by defining the Church as a hierarchy and as a communion (koinonia). At first reading, the recent constitution on the reform of the Curia Praedicate Evangelium (apart from all the juridical and technical aspects on which I am perfectly ignorant) gave me the impression of a step forward in the same direction: that is, in applying the principle sanctioned by the Council to a particular sector of the Church which is its government and to a greater involvement in it of the laity and women.

But now we have to go one step further. The example of the apostolic Church enlightens us not only on the inspiring principles, that is, on theory, but also on ecclesial practice. It tells us that not everything is resolved with the decisions taken in a synod or with a decree. There is a need to translate these decisions into practice, the so-called "reception" of dogmas. And for this we need time, patience, dialogue, tolerance; sometimes even compromise. When it is done in the Holy Spirit, the compromise is not a yielding or discounting of the truth, but it is charity and obedience to situations. How much patience and tolerance God had after giving the Decalogue to his people! How long did he wait – and still does – for its reception by us!

Throughout the story just mentioned, Peter clearly appears as the mediator between James and the newly-converted Paul, that is, between the concern for continuity and that of novelty. In this mediation, we witness an incident that can help us even today. The incident is that of Paul who at Antioch rebuked Peter for hypocrisy for having avoided sitting at table with converted pagans. Let's hear what happened from his own voice:

And when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face because he clearly was wrong. For, until some people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to draw back and separated himself, because he was afraid of the circumcised (Gal 2:11-12).

The conservatives of the time reproached Peter for having gone too far by going to the pagan Cornelius; Paul reproached him for not having gone far enough. Paul is the saint dearest to me, the one I admire and love the most. But in this case I am convinced that he let himself be carried away (and it is not the only time!) by his fiery character. At Antioch, it was Peter who was right, not him. Peter did not at all sin by hypocrisy. The proof is that, on another occasion, Paul himself did exactly what Peter did in Antioch. At Lystra, he had his companion Timothy circumcised "because," it is written, "of the Jews who were in those regions" (Acts 16:3), that is, so as not to scandalize anyone.

To the Corinthians, he writes that he became "a Jew with the Jews, to gain the Jews" (1 Cor 9:20) and in the Letter to the Romans he recommends meeting those who have not yet reached the freedom others enjoy, so as not to make the kingdom of God "a matter of food or drink" (Rom 14:1ff).

The role of mediator that Peter exercised between the contrasting options of James and Paul continues in his successors. Certainly not (which is good for the Church) uniformly in each of them, but according to each one's own charism that the Holy Spirit (and the cardinals under him) have deemed the most necessary at a given moment of the history of the Church.

Faced with political, social, and ecclesial events and realities, we are led to immediately line up on one side and demonize the opposing one, to desire the triumph of our choice over that of our adversaries. (If a war breaks out, everyone prays to the same God to give victory to their armies and annihilate those of the enemy – something which is impossible to achieve even for God!). I am not saying that it is forbidden to have preferences: in the political, social, theological fields, and so on, or that it is possible not to have them. But we should never expect God to take our side against the adversary. Nor should we ask this from those who govern us. It's like asking a father to choose between two children; to tell him: "Choose: either me or my enemy; show clearly with whom you side!" God is with everyone and therefore he cannot be against anyone! He is the father of all.

Peter's action in Antioch – like those of Paul in Lystra – was not hypocritical, but an adaptation to situations, that is, the choice of what, in a certain situation, favors the greater good of communion. It is on this point that I would like to continue and conclude this first meditation, also because this allows us to move from what concerns the universal Church to what concerns the local Church, indeed our own community or family, and the spiritual life of each of us (which is what one expects, I think, from a Lenten meditation!).

There is a prerogative of God in the Bible that the Fathers loved to underline: synkatabasis, that is, condescension. For St. John Chrysostom it is a kind of key to understanding the whole Bible. In the New Testament, this same prerogative of God is expressed by the term kindness (chrestotes). The coming of God in the flesh is seen as the supreme manifestation of God's kindness: "There has appeared the kindness of God and his love for men" (Titus 3:4).

Kindness is something other than mere goodness; it is being good to others. God is good in himself and is kind to us. It is one of the fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:22) and an essential component of charity (1 Cor 13:4). It occupies a central place in the apostolic parenthesis. We read, for example, in the Letter to the Colossians:

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if one has a grievance against another; as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you also do (Col 3:11-12).

This year we celebrate the fourth centenary of the death of a saint who was a wonderful model of this virtue in an era no less marked by bitter controversies: Saint Francis de Sales. We, in the Church, should all become "salesians", in this sense: more condescending, more kind and tolerant, less perched on our personal certainties, aware of how many times we had to acknowledge within ourselves that we were wrong about a person or a situation, and how many times we too had to adapt to situations. Thank God., in our ecclesial relations there is not – and never should be – that propensity to insult and vilify an adversary that is noticeable in certain political debates and which causes so much damage to peaceful civil coexistence.

There is someone, it is true, towards whom it is right to be intransigent, but that someone is myself. We are inclined by nature to be intransigent with others and indulgent with ourselves, while we should set out to do just the opposite: be strict with ourselves, and long-suffering with others. Taken seriously, this resolution alone would be enough to sanctify our Lent. It would dispense us from

any other type of fasting and would dispose us to work more fruitfully and more serenely in every area of the life of the Church.

A useful exercise in this area is to be honest, in the court of your heart, with the person you disagree with. When I notice that I'm accusing someone inside me, I have to be careful not to take my side right away. I have to stop going over my reasons time and time again like someone chewing gum, and instead try to put myself in the other person's shoes to understand their motivations and what they could say to me in reply.

This exercise must not be done only with respect to the single person, but also with the current of thought with which I disagree and with the solution proposed by it to a certain problem under discussion (in the Synod or at other times). St. Thomas Aquinas gives us an example: he starts each article of his Summa with the arguments of the adversary, never trivializing or ridiculing them, and then he responds with his Sed contra, that is with the reasons which he deems are in accordance with faith and morals. Let's ask ourselves (me first): do we do the same?

Jesus says: "Do not judge, in order not to be judged. [...] Why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, while you don't notice the beam in your eye?" (Mt 7:1-3). But can we live without ever judging? The ability to judge is part of our mental structure, it is a gift from God. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus' command: "Do not judge and you will not be judged" is immediately followed –as if to clarify the meaning of these words –, by the command : "Do not condemn and you will not be condemned" (Lk 6:37). Therefore, it is not a question of eliminating judgment from our heart, but rather of removing the poison from our judgment! That is, hatred, condemnation, outright rejection.

A parent, a superior, a confessor, a judge — anyone who has some responsibility over others —, must judge. Sometimes, indeed, judging is precisely the type of service one is called to exercise in society or in the Church. The strength of Christian love lies in the fact that it is capable of changing judgment from an act of non-love, turning it into an act of love. Not with our own strength, but thanks to the love that "has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us" (Rom 5:5).

Let us conclude by making our own the beautiful prayer attributed to Saint Francis of Assisi. (Maybe it's not his, but it perfectly reflects his spirit):

O Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:
where there is hate, let me bring love,
where there is offense, may I bring forgiveness,
where is discord let me bring union,
where there is doubt, let me bring faith,
where is the error, may I bring the truth,
where is the despair, may I bring hope,
where there is sadness, let me bring joy,
where is the darkness, let me bring light.

And we add:

Where there is malice, let me show goodness.
Where there is harshness, let me bring kindness!

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