

Ongoing Formation 2023

**The Gospel is the power of God
- Second Lenten Sermon -
Raniero Cantalamessa**

The Gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (Rom 1:16)

From the *Evangelii Nuntiandi* of Saint Paul VI to the *Evangelii gaudium* of the current pope, the theme of evangelization has been at the center of attention of the Magisterium. The great encyclicals of Saint John Paul II have contributed to it, as has the establishment of the Pontifical Council for Evangelization promoted by Benedict XVI. The same concern can be seen in the title given to the constitution for the reform of the Curia Praedicate Evangelium and in the denomination "Dicastery for Evangelization" given to the ancient Congregation of Propaganda Fide. The same purpose is at present assigned to the Synod of the Church. It is to it, that is, to evangelization, that I would like to dedicate this meditation.

The shortest and most complete definition of evangelization is that which can be read in the First Letter of Peter, where the apostles are defined as: "those who proclaimed the Gospel to you in the Holy Spirit" (1 Pt 1:12). It contains the essential on evangelization, namely its content – the Gospel – and its method – in the Holy Spirit.

To find out what is meant by the word "Gospel," the safest way is to ask the one who first used this Greek word and made it common in Christian language, the apostle Paul. We are fortunate to possess an exposition by his hand that explains what he means by "Gospel," and it is the Letter to the Romans. The theme of it is announced with the words: "I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (Rom 1:16).

For the success of every new effort at evangelization, it is vital to have clear the essential nucleus of the Christian proclamation, and no one has highlighted it better than the apostle in the first three chapters of the Letter to the Romans. On the understanding and application of his message to the current situation depends, I am convinced, whether children of God will be born from our efforts, or whether we will be obliged to repeat with Isaiah: *We conceived and writhed in pain, giving birth only to wind; Salvation we have not achieved for the earth, no inhabitants for the world were born (Is 26:18).*

The Apostle's message in those first three chapters of his Letter can be summarized in two points: first, what is the situation of humanity before God following sin; and second, how does one get out of it, that is, how is one saved by faith and made a new creature. Let us follow the Apostle in his stringent reasoning. Better, let's follow the Spirit who speaks through him.

Anyone who has traveled by plane will have heard once the announcement: "Fasten your seatbelts because we are about to enter an area of turbulence." The same warning should be addressed to those who are about to read the following words of Paul:

The wrath of God is indeed being revealed from heaven against every impiety and wickedness of those who suppress the truth by their wickedness. For what can be known about God is evident to them, because God made it evident to them. Ever since the creation of the world, his invisible attributes of eternal power and divinity have been able to be understood and perceived in what he has made. As a result, they have no excuse; for although they knew God they did not accord him glory as God or give him thanks. Instead, they became vain in their reasoning, and their senseless minds were darkened. While claiming to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for the likeness of an image of mortal man or of birds or of four-legged animals or of snakes.

The fundamental sin, the primary object of divine wrath, is identified, as can be seen, in asebeia, that is, in impiety. In what exactly does this impiety consist? The Apostle immediately explains, saying that it consists of the refusal to “glorify” and “thank” God. Strange enough! This fact of not glorifying and thanking God doesn’t seem to us such a terrible and mortal sin. We need to understand what is hidden behind it: the refusal to recognize God as God, not giving him the consideration that is his due. It consists, we could say, in “ignoring” God, where ignoring does not mean so much “not knowing that he exists” as “acting as if he did not exist.”

In the Old Testament we hear Moses cry out to the people: “Know that God is God!” (cf Dt 7:9) and the psalmist takes up this cry, saying: “Recognize that the Lord is God: he made us and we belong to him!” (Ps 100:3). Reduced to its germinal nucleus, to sin is to deny this “recognition;” it is the creature’s attempt to erase, on its own initiative, almost by arrogance, the infinite difference that exists between it and God. Sin attacks, in this way, the very root of things; it is “suppressing the truth with wickedness.” It is something much more sinister and terrible than man can imagine or say. If human beings knew while alive, as they will know at the moment of death, what it means to reject God, they would die of terror.

This refusal has taken shape, we have heard, in idolatry, by which the creature is worshiped instead of the Creator. In idolatry people do not “accept” God, but make a god by themselves; it is they who decide about God, not vice versa. The roles are reversed: man becomes the potter and God the vessel which man molds as he pleases. Today this ancient attempt has taken on a new form. It does not consist in putting something – not even oneself – in the place of God, but in abolishing, purely and simply, the role indicated by the word “God.” Nihilism! Nothing in place of God. But there is no need to dwell on this issue at this moment; it would interrupt listening to the Apostle who instead continues his tight reasoning.

Paul continues his indictment by showing the fruits that flow, on a moral level, from the rejection of God. From it derives a general dissolution of morals, a real “torrent of perdition” which drags humanity into ruin. And here the Apostle draws an impressive picture of the vices of pagan society. However, the most important thing to retain from this part of the Pauline message is not his list of vices, present also among the stoic moralists of the time. The disconcerting thing, at first sight, is that St. Paul makes of all this moral disorder, not the cause, but the effect of divine wrath. The formula that states this unequivocally returns three times: *Therefore God gave them over to impurity. [...] For this reason, God has abandoned them to infamous passions [...]. Because they despised the knowledge of God, God gave them over to a depraved understanding (Rom 1:24.26.28).*

God certainly does not “want” such things, but he “allows” them to make man understand where his rejection leads. “These actions,” writes St. Augustine, “although they are punishment, they are also sins, because the penalty of iniquity is to be, itself, iniquity; God intervenes to punish evil and from his own punishment other sins swarm.”

There are no distinctions before God between Jews and Greeks, between believers and pagans: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). The Apostle is so keen to clarify this point that he dedicates the entire second chapter and part of the third of his Letter to it. It is all of humanity that is in this situation of perdition, not this or that individual or people.

Where, in all this, is the topicality of the Apostle’s message that I was talking about? It lies in the remedy that the Gospel proposes for this situation. It does not consist in engaging in a struggle for the moral reform of society and the correction of its vices. For Paul, it would be like wanting to uproot a tree by starting to remove the leaves or the most protruding branches, or worrying about eliminating the fever, rather than curing the evil that causes it.

Translated into current language, this means that evangelization does not begin with morals, but with the kerygma; in the language of the New Testament, not with the Law, but with the Gospel. And what is its content and core? What does Paul mean by “Gospel” when he says it “is the power of God to everyone who believes?” Believe in what? “God’s righteousness has been revealed!” (Rom 3:21):

this is what is new. It's not men who suddenly changed their lives and customs and started doing good. The new fact is that, in the fullness of time, God acted; he broke the silence; he was the first to extend his hand to sinful man.

But let us now listen directly to the Apostle who explains to us what this "action" of God consists of. They are words that we have read or listened to hundreds of times, but we love to listen to the tunes of a beautiful symphony over and over again: *All have sinned and are deprived of the glory of God. They are justified freely by his grace through the redemption in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as an expiation, through faith, by his blood, to prove his righteousness because of the forgiveness of sins previously committed, through the forbearance of God—to prove his righteousness in the present time, that he might be righteous and justify the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom 3:23-26).*

I would like to reassure everyone right away: I do not intend to give yet another sermon on justification by faith. There is a danger in insisting solely on this issue. What Paul presents to us is not a doctrine, but an event, indeed a person. We are not saved generically "by grace;" we are saved by the grace of Christ Jesus; we are not generically justified "through faith;" we are justified through faith in Christ Jesus. Everything has changed "by virtue of the redemption wrought by Christ Jesus." The true article with which the Church stands or falls (*articulum stantis et cadentis Ecclesiae*) is not a doctrine, but a person.

I am astonished every time I read this part of the Letter to the Romans. After having described, in the tones that we have heard, the desperate situation of humanity, the Apostle has the courage to say that it has radically changed because of what happened a few years earlier, in an obscure part of the Roman Empire, by a single man, who, in addition, died on a cross! Only a blazing light from the Holy Spirit could give a man the courage to believe and proclaim this incredible news, especially since this same man once became "enraged" if anyone dared to proclaim such a thing in his presence. Deacon Stephen paid the price of his anger...

In us, the shock is cushioned by twenty centuries of confirmations, but let's think of how the Apostle's words must have sounded to educated people of the time. He was aware of it himself; for this, he felt the need to say: "I am not ashamed of the Gospel" (Rom 1:16). Indeed, one could be ashamed of it. I cannot understand how historians can honestly believe (as happened for a long time) that Paul drew his new certainty from Hellenistic cults, or I don't know from what other source. Who had ever imagined, or could humanly imagine such a thing?

But let's go back to our specific intention which is evangelization. What can we learn from the word of God that we just heard? To the pagans, Paul does not say that the remedy for their idolatry lies in better questioning the universe in order to go back from creatures to the Creator; to the Jews, he does not say that the remedy lies in going back to observing the Law of Moses more perfectly. The remedy is not over us or behind us; it is in front of us and consists in believing in "the redemption wrought by Christ Jesus."

Paul, to tell the truth, does not say something entirely new. If he were the author of this unprecedented message, those who say that the true founder of Christianity is Saul of Tarsus, not Jesus of Nazareth, would be right. But they are wrong! Paul does nothing but take up, adapting it to the situation of the moment, the inaugural proclamation of Jesus: "The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand. Convert and believe in the Gospel" (Mk 1:15). On his lips "repent" did not mean, as in the ancient prophets and in John the Baptist: Go back, observe the Law and the commandments! Rather it means: Take a leap forward; enter the Kingdom that has come freely among you! Believe the Gospel! To convert is to believe. "The first conversion consists in believing," wrote Saint Thomas Aquinas: *Prima conversio fit per fidem*.

Neither Jesus nor Paul stops, of course, at this point. In his preaching, Jesus will explain what welcoming the Kingdom entails and Paul will dedicate the entire second part of his Letter to listing

the works, or virtues, which must characterize those who have become new creatures. He concludes the kerygma with the parenesis, that is, the proclamation of what God has done with the exposition of what we must do. The important thing is the order to be followed in life and in the proclamation, where to begin. As St. Gregory the Great already said, “one does not arrive at faith starting from virtues, but at virtues starting from faith.” Every evangelization initiative that wants to start with reforming the customs of society, without – or before – trying to change people’s hearts, is doomed to end up in nothing, or worse still, in politics.

But there is no need to insist even on that at this moment. We must rather take up the positive teaching of the Apostle. What does the word of God say to a Church which – though wounded in itself and compromised in the eyes of the world – has a surge of hope and wants to resume, with new impetus, her evangelizing mission? It says that it is necessary to start afresh from the person of Christ, to speak of him “in time and out of time;” never consider the discourse about him presupposed or completed. Jesus must not be in the background, but at the heart of every proclamation.

The secular world does its best (and unfortunately it succeeds!) to keep the name of Jesus apart, or silenced, in every discourse about the Church. We must do everything to always let his name resound. Not to hide behind it, because it is the strength and life of the Church. At the beginning of *Evangelii gaudium*, we read these words:

I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfaithfully each day. No one should think that this invitation is not meant for him or her (EG,3).

As far as I know, this is the first time that the expression “personal encounter with Christ” appears in an official document of the Magisterium. Despite its apparent simplicity, this expression contains a novelty that we must try to understand. In Catholic pastoral care and spirituality, other ways of conceiving our relationship with Christ were familiar in the past. They spoke of a doctrinal relationship, consisting in believing in Christ; of a sacramental relationship, of an ecclesial relationship, as members of the body of Christ; there was also talk of a mystical or spousal relationship reserved for some privileged souls. There was no talk – or at least it was not common to talk – of a personal relationship, as between an I and a you, open to every believer.

During the five centuries we have behind us – which are improperly called “of the Counter-Reformation” – Catholic spirituality and pastoral care have viewed this way of conceiving salvation with suspicion. A danger of subjectivism was seen in it, that is, of conceiving faith and salvation as a personal experience, without a true relationship with Tradition and with the faith of the rest of the Church. The multiplication of currents and denominations in the Protestant world only strengthened this conviction.

Now we have entered, thank God, a new phase in which we strive to see differences, not necessarily as mutually incompatible and therefore to be fought, but, as far as possible, as riches to be shared. In this new climate, the exhortation to have a “personal relationship with Christ” has nothing dangerous about it. Indeed, this way of conceiving faith seems to us to be the only one possible, given that faith can no longer be taken for granted, and that it is not absorbed as children within a family or school setting, but must be the fruit of personal decision. The success of a mission can no longer be measured by the number of confessions heard and communions distributed, but by how many people have passed from being nominal Christians to real Christians, that is, convinced and active in the community.

Let us try to understand what this famous “personal encounter” with Christ actually consists of. I say it’s like meeting a person live, after having known him or her for years only through a photo. One can know books about Jesus, doctrines, heresies about Jesus, and concepts about Jesus, but not know him alive and present. (I insist on these two adjectives: a living Jesus and a present Jesus!). For many, even baptized believers, Jesus is a character from the past, a personality, not a living person.

It helps to understand the difference to look at what happens in the human sphere when you go from knowing a person to falling in love with him or her. One can know everything about a woman or a man: their name, how old they are, what studies they have done, what family they belong to... Then one day a spark is kindled and one falls in love with that woman or that man. Everything changes. They want to be with that person, have him or her for themselves, afraid of displeasing or of not being worthy of him or her.

What can we do to let this spark for the person of Jesus be kindled in the heart of many? It will not be kindled in whoever listens to the Gospel message unless it burns – at least as a desire and as a resolution – in whoever is proclaiming it. There have been and are exceptions; the word of God has its own strength and can act, at times, even if pronounced by those who do not live according to it; but that is the exception.

For the consolation and encouragement of those who work institutionally in the field of evangelization, I would like to tell them that not everything depends on them. It depends on them to create the conditions for that spark to ignite and spread which happens in the most unexpected ways and moments. In the majority of cases that I have known in my life, a life-changing discovery of Christ was brought about by meeting someone who had already experienced that grace, by participating in a gathering, by hearing a testimony, by having experienced God's presence in a moment of great suffering, and – I cannot keep silent about it, because it happened the same for me – by having received the so-called baptism of the Spirit.

Here we see the need to increasingly rely on lay people, men and women, for evangelization. They are more inserted into the fabric of life in which those circumstances usually occur. Also due to the scarcity of its number, it is easier for the clergy to be pastors than fishers of souls: easier to shepherd those who come to the Church with the word and the sacraments, than to “put out into deep water” (Lk 5:4) to fish for those who are far away. The laity can take up for us the task of fishermen. Many of them have discovered what it means to know a living Jesus and are eager to share their discovery with others.

The ecclesial movements which arose after the Council were for many the place where they made this discovery. In his homily for the Chrism Mass on Holy Thursday 2012, the last of his pontificate, Benedict XVI stated: “Anyone who considers the history of the post-conciliar era can recognize the process of true renewal, which often took unexpected forms in living movements and made almost tangible the inexhaustible vitality of holy Church, the presence and effectiveness of the Holy Spirit.” Alongside the good fruits, some of these movements have also produced rotten fruits. We should remember the saying: “Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater.”

I end with the concluding words of St. Bonaventure's *Itinerary of the Mind to God* because they suggest where to begin in order to realize, or renew, our “personal encounter with Christ” and become courageous heralds of it:

This most secret mystical wisdom no one knows except the one who receives it; no one receives it except those who desire it; no one desires it except those who are inflamed within by the Holy Spirit sent by Christ to earth.

1. Augustine, *De natura et gratia*, 22,24.

2. S.Th. I-IIae, q.113, a. 4.

www.cantalamesa.it