



ECCLESIOLOGY: PERSPECTIVES FOR THE CHURCH TODAY

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I am very happy to be with you on the occasion of your General Chapter. I greatly admire your pedagogical work which touches more than a million pupils throughout the world... I myself am a witness of the good work you do among the Palestinian people in the University of Bethlehem, of which I am an honorary Doctor...

You wish your Chapter to be in its first phase a time for deepening your understanding of our world today, and you have entrusted me with the difficult task of saying something about the reality of the Catholic Church. It is not, however, the truly clear ecclesiology suggested by the title but rather an attempt to give a phenomenological description of the Church as it is seen today.

Even with this limitation, the theme remains enormous and so much more difficult for me, living as I do in Jerusalem, with little contact in the day to day life of our communities. I would say something, however, inspiring myself with the words of a great Russian thinker and man of science, Pavel Florenskij, who died in 1937 as a martyr of his Christian faith, who used to say: "Only through immediate experience is it possible to perceive and value the treasure of the Church." That would be to say that to perceive and value the treasures of the Church, you need enter through the experience of faith.

I say this because it would be very easy to draw up notebooks of complaints, full of things that are not going very well in our Church. But this would be to remain with an external and depressing vision without seeing things with the eyes of faith which are the eyes of love. Of course, we are not going to close our eyes on things that are not going well, but we need to understand above all the overall picture in which the problems to be resolved are situated.

1. The overall situation: positive aspects

Now, if I consider the present situation of the Church with the eyes of faith, I see especially two things:

1.- There has never been in the history of the Church a period as fortunate as ours today in which the Church has its greatest geographical and cultural spread and yet finds itself substantially united as one in the unity of faith ... (with the exception of Lefevbre's traditionalists).

2.- In the history of theology there has never been so rich and flowering a period as the last century. I think that even in the 4th century, the century of the great Cappadocian Fathers of the Eastern Church and the great Fathers of the Western Church, like Saint Jerome, Saint Ambrose and Saint Augustine, there has not been so great a theological flowering as in the last century. It is enough to recall the names of Fathers de Lubac and Danielou, of Father Congar, of Fathers Hugo and Karl Rahner, of Urs von Balthasar and his master Prschywar, of Oscar Cullmann, of Martin Dibelius, of Rudolf Bultmann, of Karl Barth, of the great American theologians such as R. Niehbur.... without mentioning the liberation theologians (whatever judgment be taken in their regard now they are being given new attention by the Congregation of the Faith), and many others still alive (and here we should add the great theologians of the Eastern Church of whom we know too little, and those whom we have come to through the example of Cardinal Spidlik, such as Paul Florenskij and S. Bulgakov...).

3,- There can be very different and very nuanced views on many of these theologians, but they certainly are an impressive group such as never previously existed in the Church in times past.

We need to include also the presence of Popes so great that it would be difficult to find any other century in which there have such important personalities as Pius IX, Leo XIII, Pius XI and Pius XII, Paul VI, Jean Paul etc.

2. The overall situation: Problematic aspects

All the preceding has taken place in a world full of problems and challenges. I cannot imagine that anyone considering the life and progress of the Church as it is can put aside the burning problems of the world, such as the just distribution of goods and resources, the problem of poverty and hunger, the problems of violence and peace...

In considering the progress of the Church in itself, I take as an example that the Church has not yet fully discovered its power of binding and loosing. This impacts the path of repentance and the sacrament of penance, which the Church should always propose to its members, or with other sacraments such as marriage. I am very well aware of all the distinctions to be taken into consideration and all the precision necessary. We cannot treat of these matters here because they come under the jurisdiction of bishops or of a future Council.

Another problem often raised nowadays is the difficulty in fully understanding the limits of civil law in relation to moral law. These problems are very real, especially in certain countries, and they are often subject to a very lively dialectic of interpretation. Sometimes it is possible to imagine that we are not all living in the same historical age. Some are still living in Vatican One, others at the Council of Trent. Certain people have well or badly digested Vatican II; others are well advanced into the third millennium. We are not all true contemporaries, and this has always been a great burden for the Church and requires plenty of patience and discernment.

But I would like to pass on to the problems concerned more directly with our pedagogical and cultural situation and the problems associated with education and teaching.

The majority of us are not bishops who have to prepare the lines of a future synod for changes in the Church. We are people involved in the attempt towards a fruitful dialogue between the people of this world and the Gospel, we are here to seek to renew our pedagogy in the light of that of Jesus.

I would therefore like to say a few words on this so-called postmodern world which forms a kind of backdrop for very many of these problems and which, in some way or another, conditions the solutions.

We are concerned with a mentality which could be defined in terms of oppositions: It is in fact an atmosphere and a movement of thought against the world such as we have known it up to now. Because of this, this mentality willingly distances itself from metaphysics, Aristotelianism, the Augustinian tradition and from Rome, considered as the centre of the Church, and from very many other things.

1.- As regards metaphysics, they willingly detach themselves from this former platonic Christian world in which was taken for granted the primacy of truth and values over feelings, of intelligence over the will, of the spirit over the flesh, of unity over pluralism, of asceticism over life, of the eternal over the temporal. Today in our mentality there is spontaneous preference for feeling over the will, for impressions over intelligence, of an arbitrary logic and the search for pleasure over an ascetic and prohibitive morality. This is a world in which sensitivity, emotion, becoming, the present moment come first. Human existence, therefore, is a place where there is a freedom without restraints, where a person exercises, or believes he can exercise, his personal empire and creativity.

2.- All of this is at the same time a revolt against a too rational mentality. From literature, painting, music and especially from the new human sciences (in particular psychoanalysis) people think they can find themselves beyond the idea of living in a world ruled by rational laws, in which western civilization would be a model for the whole world to imitate. It is accepted that all civilizations are equally possible, whereas previously we insisted on the so called classical tradition. Nowadays there is a little of everything on the same plan, because there are no longer criteria by which to verify what is a true and authentic civilization.

3.- There is opposition to rationality, seen as a source of violence, because it believes it has the right to impose itself because it is true. There is acceptance of every form of dialogue and exchange because of the desire to be always open to another, to difference, to be suspicious of oneself and to mistrust whatever wishes to affirm its identity through force. That is why Christianity is not easily accepted when it presents itself as true religion. I recall a young man who said to me recently: "Above all, don't tell me that Christianity is true. That upsets me, that blocks me. It's quite something else to say that Christianity is beautiful..." Beauty is preferable to truth.

4.- In this atmosphere, technology is no longer a means at man's service, but a milieu in which someone perceives the rules to interpret the world. There is no longer an essence of things, but only the use of things for a certain end determined by the will and by the desire of each person.

5.- In an atmosphere such as our own, the refusal of sin and redemption is very present. It is said, "Everyone is equal and each person is unique." There is an absolute right to being singular and to

affirm oneself. Every moral rule is out of date. There is no more sin, nor pardon, nor redemption nor self-denial. Life can no longer be thought about as sacrifice or suffering.

6.- A last characteristic of this movement is the non-acceptance of everything which smacks of centralism and the desire to direct things from on high or from the centre. There is a great deal of an 'anti-Roman complex' in this way of thinking. In other words, we could say that we have passed from a context in which the universal counted for more, what was written and general and timeless, what was durable and unchanging, was preferred to what is particular, local and dated. Now all the ways of acting today are contrary to this vision of things. Today, the preference is for a knowledge which is more contextual, local, pluralist, adapted to different circumstances and different times, and because of that a certain relativism.

I don't want to say that all this is completely false. A great deal of discernment would be needed to distinguish the true from the false, what is said as an approximation from what is said with precision, that which is simply a tendency or a fashion from what is a solid declaration.

What I am saying here is that all this is around everywhere, especially where there are young people, and this needs to be taken into account.

And I say something more. Even in this situation, and perhaps this is an even better situation than previously, Christianity has its opportunity and can better show its character of challenge, of objectivity, of realism, of the exercise of true freedom, of a religion linked to the life of the body and not only of the mind.

I am not going to present arguments in favor of this thesis. It would be too demanding for me and for this occasion. I will content myself with saying that would be the necessary pedagogical paths needed to prepare new generations so that they might find, even in this situation, an opening to faith and to Christian hope.

I would state, however, that in such a situation, the mystery of an unavailable and always surprising God acquires greater beauty, faith understood as risk becomes more attractive, a tragic view of existence is strengthened with happy consequences in contrast with a purely evolutionary vision. Christianity appears more beautiful, closer to people, and yet more true. The mystery of the Trinity appears as the source of meaning for life and an aid to understanding the mystery of human existence.

II. The pedagogical task

The work to be done needs especially to be taken to heart with the following attitudes and carried out in the directions which I am now indicating.

Above all the attitude.

1.- Don't be surprised by diversity. Don't be frightened by what is different or new, but look upon it as something in which is found a gift from God. Prove that you can listen to things quite different from what we usually think, but without immediately judging the speaker and try to understand what

is being said and the basic arguments put forward. Young people are very sensitive about this attitude of non-judgmental listening. This attitude gives them the courage to say what they really feel and to begin to distinguish what is true from what is only true in appearance. As Saint Paul says: “Examine everything with discernment; keep what is good; keep your distance from every trace of evil” (! Th 5, 21-22).

2.- Take risks. Faith is the great risk of life. :”Whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but the one who loses his life for my sake will save it” (Mt 16, 25). Everything has to be given up for Christ and his Gospel.

3.- Put the poor in the centre because they are the friends of Jesus who made himself one of them. Amazement before the Gospel, from Nazareth to Bethlehem, to the Jordan, to the Passion and to such a private resurrection.

4.- Nourish yourself with the Gospel, as Jesus tells us in the discourse on the bread of life’ “for the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world” (John 6,33).

III. The paths

What exercises are proposed to live these attitudes? I will suggest four:

1.-*Lectio divina*: Frequent recommendations from Benedict XVI...” It is especially necessary that the listening to the Word becomes an essential meeting, following the ancient and present day tradition of *lectio divina*, enabling us to discover in the biblical text the living word that challenges us, directs us, which gives shape to our existence” (NMI n.39). “The Word of God nourishes life, prayer and the daily journey, it is the principle of unity of the community in a unity of thought, the inspiration for continuing renewal and for apostolic creativity” (Setting out again from Christ, 2002, n.24).

2.- Self-mastery; cf. Paul Gal 5,25. We need to learn anew that the frank opposition to desires is sometimes more joyful than endless concessions to everything that seems desirable and which ends in boredom and satiety...

3.- Silence. We need to move away from this unhealthy slavery to rumors and endless chattering, from characterless music which only makes noise, and find each day at least one half-hour of silence and a half day each week to think about ourselves , to reflect and pray for a longer period. That may seem difficult to ask but when you give an example of interior peace and tranquility resulting from this exercise, the young take courage and find this an unprecedented source of life and joy.

4.- Humility. Do not think that it is up to us to solve the great problems of our times. Leave room for the Holy Spirit, who works better than we do and more deeply than us. Do not wish to stifle the Spirit in others: it is the Spirit who breathes. But be sensitive to its most subtle manifestations, and for that you need silence.