

Mission and Charity in “Desert Situations” and the Challenges to the CM

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In n. 15 of *The Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis reminds us that the gospel is for everyone without exception and Christians “*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.*” Evoking his predecessor, Benedict XVI, Francis underlines the truth that the Church does not grow by proselytizing, but by attraction. Basing ourselves on statistics, especially if we take into account the Western world, we affirm that the attracting force of the gospel seems to have lost vigor. The reality of the statistics attests the vertiginous fall of the number of practicing people in Catholic countries. As different authors underline, in a secular atmosphere, the Church has become one more among many institutions, which compete to have their voice heard in the public forum. Nevertheless, could this phenomenon by itself justify the lack of attraction and the consequent desertification of the sacred space?

In this article, I propose to reflect about the possibility of evangelizing in the concrete circumstance we metaphorically call “dessert times.” In general terms by “desert” one understands the time and place of the absence of favorable conditions for the appearance and balanced development of a way of life like the religious (Christian) one, the one offered to us basing itself on the Word and the Eucharist. We should let ourselves be concerned by the questions, more than stubbornly seeking the correct answers, the strategies that permit us to live under the anesthetized illusion of having a solution for today’s problems, the time we might characterize, from another perspective as “a favorable time.”

1. Desert Times: What Diagnostic?

What time are we in? Is it possible to define a time in which everything moves so quickly? Do the signs we associate with the present historical circumstances tell us something about a time of such pain? In the introduction to his book *The Civilization of the Spectacle*, Vargas Llosa keenly states: “It is probable that never in history have so many treatises, essays, theories, and analyses been written about culture as in our time.”¹ Just as bodily pains, once identified, are the language for diagnosis, the pains of our time, once identified, can help understand the dominant pathology, i.e., the configuring traits of our collective personality. What are the most significant complaints of the people of our time? What are their pains? What are the symptoms of this technologically developed society with never before attained levels of wellbeing? They are the pains of the soul: indifference, lack of interest in the causes of the “common good,” tedium and emptiness, symptoms of a society which multiplies the “no places” (M. Auge), which does not get along well with authority, and so is deeply submerged in a cultural atmosphere that is fragmented and fluid (Z. Bauman). This is the time of the “no times” for tolerating the maturation in the acquisition of a pleasure, in the obtaining of a prize, in the unfettered seeking of satisfaction at any price which, rapidly, becomes tiresome. It is the time of the dictatorship of narcissism, the empire of the ephemeral (G. Lipovetsky) which, on the other hand, in terms of our present neoliberal economic system, imposes conditions of work that in some places are akin to slavery. It is a culture which favors the “corrosion of character” (R. Sennett). Nevertheless, it is in this time that we are called to evangelize. If the message of the Teacher of Palestine has crossed the centuries, it is because it is valid for all times. Today it continues to be the inspiring answer for men and women of every kind. Therefore, we are called to propose it in our time as well.

¹ Vargas Llosa, M. *A Civilizacao do espetaculo* [*The Civilization of the Spectacle*], Lisbon, Quetzal, p. 11.

1.2 The End of Christianity?

Today we can state that the older generations shared a code of life whose coordinates were offered by the values of a society in which the Church occupied a central place. The ringing of the (church) bell marked the passing of time and called for the participation of the faithful in the most varied celebratory occasions. From birth to death, the sacraments marked the most important stages of our personal history and nourished, by means of the Eucharist and eventually through reconciliation, the weekly routine of believers. Referring to this model, the French theologian P. Bacq states: “people became Christians almost by osmosis, adopting, simply, the ways of thinking, the behaviors, and the practices of the believing environment to which they belonged. Matters of faith developed naturally, identifying themselves with the practice: being Christian was being baptized and practicing.”² The churches were filled with the faithful and the children who did well in school or who had the economic resources for it came to the seminary. Once ordained, they were sent to the numerous parishes where they replicated the pastoral model dominant for centuries in their native lands.

This model of Christianity lasted for centuries. Today, in many European cities, instead of full churches, we find places filled with objects and images we would easily associate with a museum, places that awaken interest from an artistic point of view, that evoke historic facts, that arouse the curiosity of tourists, but which rarely are visited as places for the celebration of the faith.

Why has the theme of faith been transformed into a “rare thing,” to such a degree that there are those who wonder about the end of Christianity? Will we be the last generation of Christians? We recognized that there is a perverse effect of the religious phenomenon

² Bacq, P, “Para una pastoral da gestacao” [“For Pastoral Care of Pregnancy”] in Theobald, C. and Bacq P., *Uma nova oportunidade par a Evcangelho [A New Opportunity for the Gospel]*. Lisbon: Paulinas, 2013, p. 8.

that has aroused the passionate reaction of some atheists, as the writer C. Stenger sums up in his popular work, *O medo da insignificancia* [*Fear of Insignificance*].³ Stenger illustrates the new wave of criticism advocated by the “horsemen of the apocalypse”⁴ in their well-known works, and concludes that for them religion is always bad and poisons the life of man and should thus be eliminated. To what degree can we reverse this situation?

2. The Return of God

The attacks of these “horsemen” on the religious conception did not dispel the existential horizon of the religious phenomenon. On the contrary, they have had the merit of awakening new ways of approaching the sacred, above all, of stimulating the purification of the expressions which detracted from the message of Jesus. In general terms, in the beginning of the 21st century, there is a notable vigor in religious movements as demonstrated in the study carried out by J. Michlethwait and A. Woolbridge titled *The Return of God – How the Return of Faith Is Changing the World*. Turning to facts and to the reading of statistics, the authors find evidence of a resurgence of a plurality of religious expressions, even in countries where the name of God has been prohibited like Russia and China. The thousands of refugees who today “invade” Europe are, in their great majority, believing men and women who profess another creed and, therefore, to European eyes, constitute a threat to their security and challenge the tenuous identity of a continent with an aging population. As R.

³ Stenger, C., *O medo da insignificancia: Como dar sentido a nossas vidas no seculo XXI* [*Fear of Insignificance: How to Make Sense of Our Lives in the 21st Century*]. Lisbon: Lua de Papel, 2012.

⁴ Cf. Harris, S. (2004), *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason*, New York, NY: Norton; Dennett, D.C. (2005), *Breaking the Spell: Religion as Natural*, New York, NY: Viking; Hitchens, C. (2007), *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Absolutely*, New York, NY: Twelve Books; Onfray, M. (2007), *Atheist Manifesto*, New York, NY: Arcade; Dawkins, R. (2006), *The God Delusion*, New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin.

Dawkins says, in the U. S. and Europe today, surely for distinct reasons, ridiculing religion is as risky as burning the national flag in the headquarters of an extreme right wing group.⁵ Religious fervor is at the source of the greatest tensions; but it is in this paradoxical context that the follower of Jesus is called to evangelize.

2.1 The Search for God in the Questioning about Meaning

In the beginning of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is the affirmation that man thirsts for God, and only in Him “will he find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for.”⁶ The theme of man’s natural aptitude for God is a recurring one in universal literature, and in particular, in the writings inspired by Christianity. It is clear in all the great authors, from the Fathers of the Church to the most recent conciliar documents. They are all unanimous in affirming that the human vocation is only fully realized in communion with God.

The question about meaning is one of the privileged ways for discovering God. Upon asking himself about the meaning of history, personal and collective, man necessarily debates with God. As W. Kasper wrote, in asking about the meaning of life the question of God inevitably arises. That question “is only possible in a horizon of universal questioning. We can only speak sensibly about God when we are not asking about this or that thing, but rather when we ask ourselves about the meaning of the whole of reality. The question of meaning is thus transformed into the starting point for an understandable and responsible discourse about God.”⁷

⁵ Cf. Dawkins, R. (2006) *A Desilusao de Deus* [*The Disillusionment of God*], Lisbon, Casa de las Letras, 2nd Ed. 2007, p. 17.

⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 27.

⁷ Kasper, Walter, *Introdução à fé* [*Introduction to Faith*], Porto: Ed Telos, 1972. About this theme, cf., for example, Fisichella, R., *A fé como resposta de sentido. Abandonar-se ao mistério* [*Faith as a Response to Meaning. Abandoning Oneself to Mystery*], Lisboa: Paulinas, 2006.

Existential psychology, for example, confirms that religious experience is inevitable because it exercises an important function to the extent that it protects man from anxiety, especially in the face of his anguish about death. Faith endows man with an attitude of confidence which allows him to face the most dangerous abysses throughout his life. The cosmivision of the believer finds meanings beyond what is explicable; and, to paraphrase the French poet, C. Peguy, this gazing towards the eternal is the basis of hope, that which, as the youngest of the three sisters – faith, hope, and charity – is the most resistant, the one that guides the older ones. If God is the answer to man in every age, what can we do so that His message arrives to all its recipients, promoting a liberating movement of all the structures which despise life and prolong senseless suffering?

2.2 The Adventure of Faith

The perspective of faith tells us that man is essentially the same creature born from God’s hands. It is true that the virus of evil contaminates his nature or, as Cardinal Ratzinger stated, “it is infiltrated by a different factor which, besides the tendency oriented towards God, is another call that moves us away from God.”⁸ The sacred texts retain a surprising timeliness because we continue to be like Cain, the brother who, for envy, killed his brother; or, as an alternative, we are like Abraham the example of the believer who, motivated by a divine impulse, contemplates the starry heavens searching for answers to his anxieties. We are like David or one of the disciples, capable of the best and the worst; very different roads about which the ancient sage reflected as he composed Psalm 1.

Matters of a pastoral nature are on the table. What strategies should we take on? As Vincentian pastoral agents, what contribution can we give to make the “the gospel effective”? As J-M Donegani emphasizes, the unprecedented nature of our present circumstances

⁸ Ratzinger, J., *Deus e o mundo: A fe crista explicada por Bento XVI [God and the World: The Christian Faith Explained by Benedict XVI]* Coimbra: Tenacitas, 2006, p. 49.

does not mean, by that mere fact, that they are more adverse to the Gospel proposal than former times.⁹ The paradigm shift which looms on the horizon demands of pastoral agents a greater attention to the signs of the times in order to give an adequate response in accord with our charism summed up in the gospel passage: “He has sent me to preach the Good News to the poor.” Curiously, history shows that, in these great transitional periods, men inspired by God have appeared who knew how to respond to the necessities of the time in accord with the gospel. We have, for example, Saints Benedict, Francis of Assisi, and Vincent de Paul. The study of the inculturation of the gospel message is certainly helpful for understanding the present day; but it would be useless to seek in the old trunk pastoral responses for today’s challenges. The past may be enlightening, but as the wise man of the Old Testament affirmed: “everything has its time; and whatever you want under the heavens has its hour” (Ecclesiastes 1:1). Our time demands new resources, new language, and a different attitude.

2.3 A Proposal: the Pastoral Plan for Gestation (Development)

The joint work published in 2004 under the direction of the theologians P. Bacq and C. Theobald, titled *Une nouvelle chance pour l’Evangile. Vers une pastorale* [A New Chance for the Gospel. Towards a Pastoral Plan] is presented as a relevant reflection from which we can mine some concrete lines of action. After putting forward the current pastoral models – the pastoral of transmission or of setting; the pastoral of welcome, that of proposal and of initiation – P. Bacq gives time to the pastoral proposal of gestation, defining it as one which refers us “to the most powerful, most fragile, most joyful, most painful human experience which exists.”¹⁰ It contains a project which gives rise to life from love (not from ideology or guilt), the life which is defended in every circumstance in which it

⁹ Donegani, J-M., *Inculturacao e gestacao do crer* [Inculturation and Development of Believing] in Theobald, C. and Bacq, P., *op. cit.*, pp. 35-55.

¹⁰ Cf. Bacq, P., *op. cit.*, pp. 7-34.

is precarious or marginalized. The author recalls that the “heart of the gospel is there” in the unyielding defense of life. Furthermore this perspective seeks the harmonious involvement of the masculine and the feminine because “no one engenders by himself.” This approach invites us to recognize fully the gifts of each one and it encourages reciprocal relationships which foster the “same care of each one towards the others” (1 Corinthians 12), a care which develops ecclesial cells on a human scale, in continuous dialogue, from which spring entirely new pastoral initiatives, a “handmade” pastoral plan, not an assembly line one. In this environment, it is desirable that each one arrive at his own identity, that each one be faithful to himself. Freed from the obsession of defining strategies, this model prioritizes reflection about the following points: What goes on between God and these men and women who live at the dawn of the 21st century? How does God invite the Church to transform its traditional way of believing and living to permit the encounter? How does God draw near to the person with whom I am speaking?

To these questions, we, as Vincentians, can add some others: To what degree can the Vincentian charism contribute to the development of God’s seeds in these periphery situations? Are we in the context of the desert?

2.4 A Vincentian Optic: Mission and Charity

The Vincentian perspective brings with it a mark that encompasses two moments, which, although different, are inseparable – two sides of the same coin: Mission and Charity. What do we understand by these words? In certain contexts a partial vision prevails which tends to restrict the Mission to the proclamation and the charitable activity to the works. If, at the conceptual level, it is possible and even advantageous to make this distinction, in practice it only makes sense if we understand them as different moments of the same process of evangelization. The Word of God is, in its essence, operable, that is, generative of a new reality. In Sacred Scripture, from its very first pages, we can see the intimate relationship between what is

announced and what is carried out. Thus in the creation narrative we find, on the one hand, “God said,” and, on the other hand, “it was done, it was created.” The word and the event are inseparable. Indeed the Hebrew word “*dabar*” means simultaneously *word* and *action* as the passage of Isaiah 50:10-11¹¹ suggests. Christ is, par excellence, the Word of God not only for the word he preached, but also for the gestures he carried out. His many miracles are the guarantee of the truth of the presence of God’s reign among men. From this same perspective, Vincent de Paul proposes a “format” for the mission which inevitably includes the exercise of charity. The missionary is called to imitate Jesus with two facets, spiritual and corporal, because the perfect following of Jesus lies in these two movements.

And so, as Vincentians, in conformity with the charismatic intuition of our founder, we are called not to neglect these two aspects in our pastoral action. The proclamation of the Word commits us to the cause of the poor with its different implications, i.e., not just in an assistencialist attitude, but also in the promotion of the disadvantaged and in the struggle against the structures which allow for exploitation. If the Word is just repeated without consequences for daily life, personally and communally, i.e., if there is no conversion translated into concrete gestures like those of Zacchaeus who, for having met Jesus, decides to return what he had robbed, then it is not God’s Word and has not been received as such.

In Conclusion: a way through the desert

The Book of Acts describes the episode in which Philip is sent on a road through the desert. On the surface, this proposal would be absurd for a missionary, because in the desert he would find no people to evangelize. The attitude of Philip, obedient to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, is to go forward into arid land, and thus he draws out the reason for being of the Church. As Benedict XVI says, the

¹¹ Cf. Santabábara, L. González-Carvajal, *Con los pobres contra la pobreza* [*With the Poor against Poverty*], Madrid: San Pablo, 1991, pp. 173-187.

mission of the Church is to rescue people from the desert and lead them “towards the place of life, towards friendship with the Son of God, towards the One who gives us life, and life in abundance.”¹²

Today, the Holy Spirit continues to challenge us to follow roads in the desert, improbable routes, in order to explain and to baptize new Ethiopians. They are demanding journeys. They can only be survived by those who are prepared and who maintain a sufficiently motivated perspective towards the future, capable of compensating for the bitterness of a journey full of unforeseen happenings. The temptations of the flesh pots of Egypt or to remain bogged down contemplating the past like Lot’s wife will be frequent. The earth burned by the sun will easily become the burial ground of the unprepared.

But this barren land is also the place where God’s voice can be heard more easily. In the silence of empty places the voice resounds which attracts us and calls our name. As members of the CM, animated by the love for God’s nomads, will we know how to give drink and heal the wounds of the malnourished? Will we be prepared for this mission? Will we be working so that from this dead land can spring up green spaces, small oases where the seed of God’s word can be generously sowed?

Taking on this mission of guides in the desert demands reinforcing our identity in the light of our foundational charism; it implies an internal *aggiornamento*, a dissuading ourselves from seeking easier paths, but far from the pilgrims who, every day, ask about the meaning of the scriptures. This is the time in which, assuredly, God’s voice is heard with greater clarity. Let us sharpen our hearing.

Translated from the Spanish by Joseph V. Cummins, CM

¹² Homily at the Mass for the beginning of his Pontificate, 24 April 2005. AAS 97 (2005), 710.