



Excerpts from a Conference of Bishop Claude Champagne, O.M.I.

The New Evangelization (1)

Last October, Bishop Claude Champagne, O.M.I., the new Bishop of Edmundston, launched our 2008-2009 pastoral year at the Diocesan Centre by speaking to us about the reality of the New Evangelization.

Two Essential Realities

Before addressing the theme of the new evangelization, I believe it important to consider two essential elements: our increased ecclesial awareness of the universal presence of the Spirit of the Risen Christ in our world, and the reality of God's Reign at the heart of the mission of Jesus and his disciples. Our Church's profound conviction today of the universal nature of the action of the Holy Spirit has a major impact on the way we live our mission of evangelization. John Paul II, moreover, describes the Holy Spirit as "the principal agent of mission".

The Spirit, Principal Agent of Mission

When the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council decided to look at the world from the perspective of the faith, they sought to discern the "signs of the times", the work of the Spirit in the world, in order to work with the Spirit. The pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes* is in fact the fruit of this undertaking. Those among us who are familiar with Catholic Action will recognize the See-Judge-Act approach: see the reality of our world, of our society; judge it in the light of the Gospel, of the faith; and take action to respond to Christ's call. This approach could provide us with a new method in theology. In the past, we reflected on matters of faith in a deductive manner. We recall the more traditional dogmatic approach that marked theology for centuries, a theology elaborated with Denzinger, the collection of the Church's dogmatic declarations. Throughout the ages, dogmatic statements, supported by a few biblical texts, sometimes taken out of context, served as a starting point for theological reflection. Elements for reflection and current ecclesial life were deducted accordingly. With the biblical renewal in the years preceding Vatican II, this deductive method was modified to some extent. The starting point for theology became the holy Scriptures, followed by the contributions of the Church Fathers, the great theologians of the Middle Ages and those of modern and contemporary times. These documents provided the basis for theologians to reflect on how to shed light on the life of the Church in their time. With *Gaudium et Spes*, the Council Fathers opened the door to a more inductive theology, beginning with context, our situation.

Fruitful Dialogue

Admittedly, this new method is not exclusive. It cannot dispense with the deductive method. In fact, how could we recognize the action of the Spirit of the Risen Christ in our world today if we do not know how he was present in the history of salvation? Current theology assumes a fruitful dialogue between the two methods, deductive and inductive: allowing ourselves to be challenged by the questions of the present time and finding enlightenment in the Gospel, which is for all time. It was in this way that the Church became aware of the universal action of the Spirit of the Risen Christ. Although *Gaudium et Spes* already claimed that every human person was mysteriously joined to Christ's Paschal Mystery, Pope John Paul II in his encyclical "*Dominum et Vivificantem*" made it clear that the Holy Spirit is at work always and everywhere, even before the Christian economy. Since we are social beings, we can conclude that the Holy Spirit is at work not only in individuals but in the groups that we form. It was in this way that Pope John Paul II recognized the action of the Holy Spirit in history and societies, in cultures and various religions. Following the prophetic meeting at Assisi in 1986 for the prayer for peace, the Pope also affirmed that all authentic prayer, regardless of its origin, is inspired by the Spirit of the Risen Christ.

Contemplation and Action

These new elements lead us to view the life of mission as one that includes a dimension of contemplative life, contemplation of the presence and action of the Spirit of the Risen Christ in all those to whom we are sent to proclaim the Good News, believers and unbelievers, persons from our generations and members of new generations. This action of the Spirit helps us to understand that the mission today is not unidirectional; instead, it is both giver and receiver, for both partners can bring their riches, their experience of the Spirit to the other, which is implied in dialogue. This means that before we discuss the mission we have received as a Church, we must affirm that the primary mission, the most important in our world today, is first and foremost that of the Spirit of the Risen Christ, already at work, who precedes us in the world. It means that we do not go forth to conquer the world in order to bring God to this world. We do not make him present in our world: he was already there long before we arrived. We are not ambassadors of the Risen Christ and his Spirit, but we make visible his presence and action. The important thing is to recognize him, welcome him and collaborate with him, who prepares humans for journeying toward the plenitude of the Reign of God, already inaugurated in Christ's Paschal Mystery.

The Reign of God

The other important element for our vision of the "new evangelization" is the central role of the Reign of God, proclaimed and inaugurated by Jesus in his Paschal Mystery. In recent decades we have understood how the proclamation and inauguration of God's Reign is the goal of Jesus' mission, rather than the Church, which he mentioned only occasionally. Mission can no longer be ecclesiocentric as it was until Vatican II. No, the Church understands itself today as being at the service of the Reign of God. John Paul II recognized this evolution in his missionary encyclical. Admittedly, Jesus never defined this Reign, but he makes it present: what he was, what he did and what he said enable us to comprehend what he meant by the Reign of God.